

# **Working Their Way Out of Poverty?**

## **Australian Sole Mothers, Labour Market Participation and Welfare Reform**

by

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## Certificate of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma or a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.


I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, even though I may have received assistance from others on style, presentation and language extension.

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## Thesis Abstract

Over the last 30 years, the social policy discourse surrounding Australian sole mothers' relationship to the labour market has altered dramatically. Policy has swung from supporting sole mothers to stay home to rear children to, now, obligating market activity once a child reaches school age. These policy shifts have been fuelled by social, demographic changes, plus, more latterly, changes in political ideology around the nature and purpose of the welfare state. Moves to overhaul the Australian welfare system coincide with the rising influence of neo-liberalist ideologies across social and family policy prescriptions. Under welfare reform, income support reliance is cast as welfare dependency and addressed by applying mutual obligation principles to sole parents. Policy rationales centre on negative comparisons of the workforce activity of sole mothers with that of married mothers. Simultaneously, family policy is creating direct disincentives for partnered mothers to return to the workforce. The juxtaposition of these competing policy directions creates a conflict in the ideological positioning of sole and married mothers within a market economy. The central question of this thesis emerges from this policy dichotomy, and asks: is sole mothers' relationship to the labour market different from that of married mothers?

Using data from the Negotiating the Lifecourse Survey (NLC) 1996/97, the thesis comparatively examines sole and married mother respondents ( $N = 585$ ) across three labour market dimensions. The ideological dimension compares the mothers' attitudes towards the compatibility of mothering and market work; the practical dimension examines the sole and married mothers' current workforce status and reasons for this level of market activity; and the financial dimension explores the comparative impact of mothers' occupational and partnered status on household material well-being. The results indicate that for sole and married mothers, the pathway to labour market activity is the same and intimately connected to the mothering role. Yet within this core similarity, the results also suggest that sole mothers' relationship with the labour market is more complex, with the soleness of sole motherhood emerging as a significant explanatory factor in all three comparative analysis. The thesis concludes that despite motherhood being the defining feature of

each group's labour market relationship, the *environment* in which sole and married mothers negotiate their labour market determinations differs. To illustrate this vital difference in the personal, social, and political *reality* of sole motherhood, within the core of motherhood similarity, a Domain of Motherhood Model is developed. The model's two panels emphasise the essential similarity in sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market while also demonstrating that each dimension of the sole mothers' labour market relationship – the ideological, the practical and the financial – is, itself, enveloped within the lived experience of being a sole mother in the Australian 'liberal' welfare state. Finally, a range of policy alternatives is explored and the likely direction of future welfare reform on sole mothers' relationship with the labour market is canvassed.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.0 Introduction

Australia has over half a million sole parent families. The percentage of sole parent households, as a proportion of all families with dependent children, has more than doubled in the past 25 years, rising from 9 per cent in 1975 to 22 per cent in 2002 (ABS 2002a). On present indications, the ABS (1999a) estimates that up to half of all Australian children will live in a sole parent family at some point in their childhood. Sole parent families are, therefore, an increasingly common phenomenon in Australian family life. Yet, paradoxically, despite the increasingly widespread nature of the sole parent household, sole parenthood is also increasingly defined as problematic. In the shifting political and public discourse of the 1990s and early 2000s, sole motherhood is situated pejoratively in debates around welfare, work and the family. With women heading up to 90 per cent of sole parent families (ABS 2001a), the problem of sole parenthood mostly means the problem of sole motherhood.

Why is sole motherhood a problem? This is a difficult question and the one that is at the heart of this thesis. Rising proportions are a key factor, yet the problematic nature of sole motherhood is far more complex than mere proportional increase. Whatever the statistical definition, sole motherhood is not just a different family form. As a concept, sole motherhood is neither neutral nor apolitical. Political and moral evaluations inevitably infiltrate any social policy discussion of sole motherhood (Silva 1996). Indeed, as Ford and Millar (1998) argue, the 'problem' posed by sole mothers varies over time, amongst countries and according to political and moral perspective. In sociological terms, such spatial, ideological and historical disparities point to the problem of sole motherhood as being essentially socially constructed in nature.

This variation in 'problem' conceptualisation is reflected in contemporary political debate around welfare reform in Australia. The changing ideological and political

dimensions of the discourse around sole mothers that are encapsulated by the discourse of welfare reform, however, do not stand alone. Rather, they correlate with the rising dominance of the ideologies and political forces of neo-liberalism (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999; Duncan & Edwards 1999). Castles (2000) posits Australia amongst the largely Anglo-American nations that have, during the 1980s and 1990s, overhauled their economic and social policy institutions to make them more responsive to market disciplines. Resultant changes include labour market deregulation, reduced taxation, cuts in public expenditure and a more stringent targeting of benefits.

This fundamental change in the discourse of the appropriate relationship of sole mothers to the labour market is now beginning to be reflected in changing social policy. As part of welfare reform, mutual obligation principles and breaching provisions are now imposed on Australian sole mothers along with other non-employed adults of working age. Sole parents with a youngest child aged six or older are required to develop a return to work plan with Centrelink and those whose youngest child is aged 13 or older will be required to complete 150 hours of mutual obligation activity over a six month period. Failure to participate in a mutual obligation activity will result in a reduction of Parenting Payment (FaCS 2001). It is important to recognise, here, that while the social policy being implemented in the current raft of welfare reform appear mild by the standards of those imposed in some other western nations, it is the change in the discourse around the expected relationship of sole mothers to the labour market that is so fundamental. This core shift is demonstrated in the way that growing sole parent numbers are increasingly cast as a fiscal burden and a critical social policy dilemma. With need and deservingness now defined in market terms of economic independence and self-reliance, sole mothers form a highly visible group in an increasingly stigmatised welfare system. High levels of income support are taken as evidence that sole mothers are entrenched in the socially and morally damaging culture of welfare dependency. Increased labour market activity is proposed as the policy solution for this welfare dependent state. In the binary division between work and welfare, raising a child alone is not deemed to be work.

Yet the political and social context of welfare reform is different for sole mothers. While neo-liberalist economics advocate reversing the growth of the welfare state and self-reliance through market work, a reassertion of the caring responsibilities of the family is also prescribed (Fraser & Gordon 1994; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Sole mothers stand outside this dominant paradigm. On one hand, their state reliance, as opposed to the legitimate spousal dependence of partnered mothers, places them at odds with family policy. On the other, their ongoing mothering obligations clash with a welfare reform agenda that reinforces the supremacy of the market. Increasing labour market activity among sole mothers, therefore, has a political significance far wider than the policy issues raised (Baker 2000). Within this broader framework it is argued that the problem of sole motherhood has become a symbol for rival discourse about the nature of the family, the welfare state and the value and legitimacy of caring work in a market economy (Moore 1996; Roseneil & Mann 1996; Smart 1999).

The practical context is also different for sole mothers. For effective family functioning, all households require inputs of income, usually accessed by market work or income support, and time for unpaid household and parenting work. Yet, while couple families can share the provision of these family requirements between the household adults, a sole mother must essentially fulfil all the adult roles in the household. Although maternal employment may generate additional household income over that garnered from income support, labour market activity also necessitates a reduction in household and family work time (Vickery 1977; Becker 1981). While all households face this trade-off between paid and unpaid work, for sole mothers, the soleness of their parenting means that the replacement cost of non-market work is higher than in couple households. Sole mother households have only one set of adult hours to allocate to market and parenting work (Whiteford 1991). The soleness of sole mothering also adds an extra dimension to parenting work. In the new family terrain of the post-separation household, the parenting work requirements of sole mother households may be even higher than that in couple households. The transition to the economic, parenting and personal landscape of the sole mother family is usually a dramatic and emotional period of change for both the parent and her children (Funder et al. 1993; Swinbourne et al. 2000). In the post-separation hierarchy of family needs, combining parenting work and market work may not be practically, or personally, feasible. How the parenting work needs of sole

mother households can be reconciled with the growing imperative for labour market activity, is however, unexplained, and unexplored, in welfare reform discourse.

This thesis examines sole mothers' relationship to the labour market within the context of welfare reform. This relationship is examined from both a macro and a micro perspective and is centred on the similarities and contrasts between partnered and sole mothers in their relationship with, and connection to, market work. The contrasting of sole and married mothers is an important aspect of this thesis from both a statistical and a theoretical standpoint. Sole motherhood, in Australia, is generally a transient phenomenon. Most sole mothers pass from partnered parenthood into, or through, sole motherhood. Yet, despite the fact that the vast majority of sole mothers have been previously partnered, within social policy discourse, the two groups are dichotomised into distinct categories.

This dichotomisation leads to incongruence in the ideological direction of Australian social policy for married/partnered mothers and sole mothers. The dependence of sole mothers on state support is contrasted negatively with the financial reliance of married mothers on their husbands. Married mothers' dependence on husbands is sanctioned by the state as appropriate and socially beneficial. Recently introduced social policies such as Family Tax Benefit B and the 'baby bonus' formally encourage partnered mothers to move out of the labour market to concentrate on mothering duties. In this discourse, market work and good mothering are deemed incompatible. For sole mothers, however, reliance on social security income support in order to care for their families is not cast as good mothering but as welfare dependence, and related to inadequate participation in the labour market. Here, the lower rates of labour market participation among sole mothers are compared directly and negatively with those of married mothers. The disjunction in these rates is used as a rationale for imposing mandatory work obligations and breaching provisions on sole mothers under welfare reform. Thus, within social policy, sole and married/partnered mothers are portrayed as fundamentally different in both their actual relationship with the labour market and, more importantly, in perceptions of the 'correct' nature of the relationship each group *should* have with the labour market. These different policy perspectives on labour market participation for sole and married mothers serve to highlight the differing relationship of the state with the two family forms.

The central question of this thesis centres on this policy dichotomisation of sole and married mothers and asks:

Does Australian sole mothers' relationship with the labour market differ to that of married mothers?

This overarching question is answered by comparing Australian sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market around three distinct, but closely related, dimensions. These three aspects can be summarised as the ideological, practical and financial dimensions of sole and married mothers' relationship to the labour market. Each of these dimensions is encapsulated in a sub-question.

The first of these, the ideological dimension, has as its focus the distinction between mothers and workers. This theme relates to ideas of the exclusive and sometimes irreconcilable roles for women, either as full-time mothers or as active market employees. The sub question asked in this dimension is:

*Are sole mothers' perspectives on the compatibility of motherhood and labour market participation different to those of married mothers?*

The second aspect, the practical dimension, concentrates on the binary 'work or welfare' division of welfare reform. The growing imperative for market work by sole mothers is underlined by a policy presumption that the consistent differences in labour market participation by sole and married mothers are evidence of a lesser work effort among sole mothers. Here, the sub-question is:

*Do the different levels of labour market participation by sole and married mothers represent a different orientation to labour market activity?*

The third aspect, the financial dimension, is the role of market work in the level of material well-being in sole and married mothers' households. Much of the rationale and justification for welfare reform is based around the notion that increased labour market activity among sole mothers will result in improved material well-being for sole mother households. Yet little empirical evidence exists to support this contention. Thus, in the third dimension, the sub-question that is asked is:

*What is the comparative impact of sole and married mothers' occupational and partnered status on their household's level of material well-being?*

The thesis uses data from the first wave of the Negotiating the Life Course (NLC) Project 1996/97 to examine these three dimensions of the core question. This project is an indefinite life panel survey of Australian family members and examines the ways Australians negotiate the pathways through work and family. The NLC is a large-scale, nationally representative dataset ( $N = 2231$ ) and is a project of the Research School of the Social Sciences of the Australian National University and the University of Queensland.

The focus of this thesis is Australian sole mothers and Australian social policy. Nonetheless, there are strong similarities between the dominant discourse on sole motherhood contained in Australian welfare reform and that already seen in other English speaking countries (Jamrozik 2001; Saunders 1999). This global context is important, as it highlights the strong links between current Australian welfare reform and the political dominance of neo-liberal economic policy and market capitalism, both in Australia and overseas. Therefore, as theoretical underpinning for later discussion, this introductory chapter will also briefly examine the alignment of the Australian welfare state regime in an international context and the links between ideological discourse, welfare state regime and social policy. The range and interaction of current discourse relating to sole mothers, markets, welfare reform and the family are then delineated. Finally, the scope and limitations of the thesis are outlined, along with major themes of each of the subsequent chapters.

## **1.1 Welfare State Regimes**

Australia's welfare system is distinctive from those operating in most other OECD countries. The major differences centre on Australia's residualist system of entitlement, which is based around means-tested, low-level, flat rate payments expended from income tax revenue income. In contrast, welfare programs in most other western countries provide universal, but variable, protection based on contributory social insurance (Castles 2000). By the 1960s, Australia and New Zealand are the only OECD countries without any form of contributory social insurance. Eligibility for payments is instead situational, based on an individual's employment, family status and income and all who are deemed to qualify for assistance are paid at the same rate.

Despite this uniqueness of entitlement and eligibility structure, the core of the Australian welfare state is similar to that of other western industrialised nations. Esping-Andersen (1990, p. 2), classifies advanced capitalist countries into three welfare regime types, arguing that 'contemporary advanced nations cluster not only in terms of how their traditional social welfare policies are constructed, but also in terms of how these influence employment and general social structure'. Esping-Andersen's (1990) typologies focus on how different welfare states operate to erode the commodity status of labour in a capitalist system. The salient features of welfare states are viewed in terms of their ability for decommodification; that is, how possible it is for people to make their living in the various welfare states 'independent of pure market forces' (p. 3). On this basis, Australia, along with Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States is part of a distinctive cluster of 'liberal' welfare regimes.

Australia's place in this categorisation is a salient issue in examining the labour market position of Australian sole and married mothers. While Esping-Andersen did not specifically examine the place of mothers, the discourse on the appropriate relationship between motherhood and the labour market in the three welfare regimes types is very different. The prominence of a particular discourse on sole motherhood can, therefore, be tied to particular types of welfare state regime (Duncan & Edwards 1999). In 'liberal' welfare regimes, social policy upholds the market and traditional work ethic norms. Modest and means-tested benefits are aimed at a residualised and stigmatised group of welfare recipients and 'concerns of gender matter less than the sanctity of the market' (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 28). Hence, motherhood is not seen as a barrier to labour market participation. The social welfare systems of 'conservative' welfare regimes, represented by countries such as Germany, France, Austria and Italy, are also highly regulated social welfare systems but do not have what Esping-Andersen (1990, p. 27) terms 'the liberal obsession with market efficiency'. Entitlements and eligibility are based around status differences and guided by the principle of subsidiarity. The appropriate role of the state is to support, but not replace, social institutions such as the family or companies in welfare provision. In the 'conservative' model, Esping-Andersen (1990) contends that mothers are discouraged from working through policies such as the exclusion of non-working wives from social insurance, limited childcare services and family social benefits that encourage motherhood.

The third group, 'social democratic' welfare regimes, containing Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, are classified as the most de-commodified. Social policy is extended to all classes, with a focus on social assistance for family obligations to allow women to choose paid work over household work. Under this model, 'all benefit; all are dependent; and all will presumably feel obligated to pay' (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 28). While the power of the market is de-emphasised, there is an expectation all that adults, including mothers, will participate in the labour market to finance this universal welfare.

Australia's classification with other Anglo countries as a 'liberal' welfare regime, therefore, has two important implications for this thesis. First, it emphasises, and to an extent explains, the similarity in discourse around sole mothers and welfare reform in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and Canada. Second, the development and structure of the dominant discourse around sole mothers and welfare reform in these other countries, offers a prediction of the future direction and shape of such discourse in Australia, the likely associated reform of the Australian welfare state, and the repercussions of this for Australian sole mothers.

## **1.2 Social Policy as Discourse**

The term 'discourse' is generally understood to mean 'speaking which sets limits on what can be said' (Bacchi 1999, p. 64). The contemporary use of the term is influenced by Foucault (1974) who defines discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (cited in Bacchi 1999). Discourse, therefore, refers not only to the meaning of words and language, but also to the real effects of that language. By assigning meaning and causes, discourse acts to shape our ways of thinking and reacting to different aspects of the social world. Yet, all discourse is not equal. Foucault (1984, cited in Bryson 1992) draws attention to the essentially political nature of discourse, whereby institutional and social structures enable some discourse to be more influential than others. The discourse of the powerful tend to be legitimated via the State's backing and sanction, while rival discourses are silenced or demoted. Thus, the dominant discourse is likely to represent the interests and views of the socially powerful. In turn, social policy



construction and ‘problem’ definition form within the framework of dominant discourse. The influence of the dominant discourse is reflected in the values implicit in social policy and in the way in which different groups are assigned definitional positions such as ‘needy’, ‘deserving’ or, more often, ‘undeserving’, ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘welfare recipient’. Crucially, the dominant discourse operates to define what these terms mean and how they translate into actual policy outcomes.

From this perspective, social policy is discourse (Bacchi 1999; Bryson 1992). This is not to claim that the positioning within social policy of various social groups, such as the aged or sole mothers, is always a purposeful construct. It is not. But neither is it accidental or random. The institutional locations of discourse and the differential power of some actors in their creation must be recognised. As Foucault emphasises, a major feature of discourse is its ability to conceal its own intervention in the constitution of the objects of which it speaks. While discourse and its social policy consequences may not be deliberate artifice, neither are they ‘transhistorical structures operating outside of human intervention’ (Bacchi 1999, p. 44).

### **1.3 Sole Mothers and Discourse**

Discourse is of course contested and constantly changing terrain. Different discourses compete for ascendancy and the dominance of any particular discourse tends to vary across time, space and social group. For example, while most western countries exhibit similar patterns of rising proportions of sole mother families, it is chiefly within the ‘liberal’ welfare regime nations such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand that sole motherhood is viewed in essentially pejorative terms. In European ‘conservative’ welfare regime countries, sole mothers are still widely regarded as requiring sympathetic social assistance, while in ‘social democratic’ welfare regime countries such as Sweden, sole mothers tend to be seen as just another family form (Millar 1996). These disparate perceptions relate to fundamental differences in the dominant discourse. The societal view on sole motherhood is dependent ‘as much on the particular configuration of the discourse that guides our gaze as it does on the concrete object and facts we are scrutinising’ (Duncan & Edwards 1999, p. 25). Duncan and Edwards go on to identify four main variants of sole mother discourse co-existing within Western industrialised nations: sole motherhood as a ‘lifestyle choice’; sole

motherhood as an ‘escape from patriarchy’; sole mother as a ‘social problem’ and sole mother as a ‘social threat’.

### **1.3.1 Sole Motherhood as a ‘Lifestyle Choice’**

The ‘lifestyle choice’ discourse portrays sole motherhood as a deliberately selected option from the plurality of available family forms. This discourse has resonance with recent theories on the changing nature of family relationships. For example, in the work of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), sole motherhood can be seen as a reflection of the ‘reflexive modernist’ emphasis on family as a fluid and changing concept. As Giddens writes, ‘Individuals are actively restructuring new forms of gender and kinship relations out of the detritus of pre established forms of family life’ (1992 pp. 176-7). Under this discourse, social policy should aim to create better conditions for all family forms, such as shortened working hours and parenting leave.

### **1.3.2 Sole Motherhood as ‘Escaping Patriarchy’**

In contrast, the ‘escaping patriarchy’ discourse argues that rising rates of sole motherhood reflect a changing expectation among women who are no longer willing to accept male control over their lives. In terms consistent with radical feminism, sole motherhood is construed as a way of escaping individual patriarchy. This discourse also shares some of radical feminism’s policy prescriptions such as more support for women to leave violent relationships and direct payments to women for raising children.

While the ‘lifestyle choice’ and ‘escaping patriarchy’ discourses offer valid alternative perspectives, their acceptance is limited. As such, they do not operate to influence current social policy in any tangible way. In contrast, elements of the ‘social problem’, and especially the ‘social threat’ discourse, can be easily identified in recent debates around sole mothers and welfare reform across the western world.

### **1.3.3 Sole Mothers as a ‘Social Problem’**

Under the sole mother as ‘social problem’ discourse, sole mothers are the victims of externally created constraints and in need of considerable social assistance. The

social and economically disadvantaged position of sole mothers is linked to their social marginalisation and workforce participation barriers. Factors such as social security poverty traps and lack of childcare are perceived as obstacles and the aligned social policy focus is the removal of such labour force participation barriers (Edwards & Duncan 1996). Typical social policy initiatives linked with this discourse include the funding of childcare services, training and employment access programs and the identification and reduction of employment disincentives contained in income support systems, such as high effective marginal tax rates. This discourse appears consistent with Australian social policy up to the early 1990s. The Social Security Review of the mid-1980s included a focus on identifying barriers to sole parents' connection to the labour market. Subsequent policy recommendations were also generally in line with 'social problem' discourse solutions. These included: the temporary continuation of some components of assistance after leaving Sole Parent Pension, help for sole parents in improving work skills, the provision of job search assistance and access to affordable and suitable childcare (Raymond 1987).

#### **1.3.4 Sole Mothers as a 'Social Threat'**

Since the early 1990s the influence of the 'social problem' view of sole motherhood appears to have diminished. In English speaking countries especially, the social problem perspective has largely been displaced by a discourse that views sole mothers as a 'social threat' (Roseneill 1996; Millar 1996; Duncan & Edwards 1999; Uttley 2000). This threat has both moral and financial elements. Fiscally, sole mothers are constituted as a burden on the state, selecting reliance on benefits over marriage or legitimate economic activity. The moral fibre of society is also perceived as directly threatened by sole mothers choosing to have illegitimate children or leave marriages to access state benefits. Further, these selfish choices are seen as resulting in the children of sole mothers growing up damaged by the lack of a father, with a consequent impact on the whole of society (Millar 1996).

Under this discourse, forcing sole mothers to act in a legitimate, economically rational way can reduce the social threat. Associated social policy therefore focuses on reducing benefits and obligating labour market participation. Restrictions on payments to sole mothers who bear additional children while on income support and encouragement and rewards for traditional male breadwinner/homemaker married

couples are also commonly debated (Duncan & Edwards 1999). The archetypal example of social policy operating under the social threat discourse is the 1996 welfare reform legislation in the United States. This legislation replaced the never generous Aid for Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) with the Temporary Assistance for Need Families (TANF). Along with a decentralisation of the program back to individual states, TANF includes mandatory work obligations for all sole mothers, in some states as soon as six weeks after the birth of a child, and places a 60-month lifetime limit on mothers' access to welfare support (Harris & Edin 2000).

## **1.4 Interaction of Sole Mother, Market and Family Discourse**

The origins of the 'social threat' discourse are ascribed to American right wing political ideology. Charles Murray argued influentially in his book, *Losing Ground* (1984, republished 1994), that income support for the unemployed and sole mothers encouraged both social irresponsibility and moral sloth. These claims now form a major plank of the neo-liberalist critique of the welfare state. That is, first, that the cost of the welfare state is spiralling out of control and radical cuts are needed to reduce the impost of welfare budgets. Second, and more important ideologically, the moral and practical benefit of the welfare state is questioned. Rather than reducing poverty and inequality, the modern welfare state is seen as undermining people's traditional commitment to self-reliance, fostering instead a culture of welfare dependency. Therefore, not only is it economically rational to cut welfare spending, it is also morally appropriate to do so (Jamrozik 2001; Saunders 1999).

The social policy result of this critique, welfare reform, also displays the influence of American-sourced neo-liberalism in its associated rhetoric and ideology. Walker (2001) contends that three core components of American welfare thinking have been directly exported into the policy debate of other countries. These are: a commitment to proactive welfare policy; the concept of mutual obligation with a focus on the expectation of social assistance beneficiaries to seek work; and a concern about a culture of welfare dependence and particularly the inter-generationality of such welfare dependence. All three of these core ideas have now also surfaced in the discourse, debate, and subsequent policy initiatives of welfare reform in Australia.

Neo-liberal approaches to policy framing are also evident in the associated dominant political discourse on the family. While a defining characteristic of a liberal social policy regime is state intervention that is subordinate to the market and the family, the consequences for particular families depend on which form of private responsibility is most supported by public policy (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). In Australia and other English speaking countries, the socio-political response to changing family demographics has been a resurgence in support for the traditional two-parent family organised along defined caring and labour market lines (Jamrozik & Nocella 1998; Crittendon 2001). It is here that the dominant family discourse links into the 'social threat' and welfare reform discourse. Sole mother families, as opposed to couple families, and welfare dependence, as opposed to market reliance, are defined as the problem with a return to traditional family models the solution. For example, Mead (1999), a prominent American advocate of welfare reform, argues that the solution to welfare dependency lies not in rebuilding society but in rebuilding the family. Dysfunctional parents, he asserts, create dysfunctional offspring and the enforcement of work in welfare will lead to a reinvigoration of the traditional two-parent family. While the main cause of Mead's family dysfunction is the unmarried mother, separated or divorced mothers are also perceived as culpable.

In sum, at the core of this articulation is a dichotomising of mothers along age-old lines. The result is a weighted measuring of sole mothers against the idealised married mother on two fronts. First, the effectiveness of sole parenting is negatively compared with the dual parenting model, with the boundary between unpartnered and married mothers coinciding with the boundary between the good and the bad mother (Smart 1996; McIntosh 1996). Second, rising rates of sole motherhood are deemed a threat to the established order of married parenting and family-based economic arrangements. In this discourse, the family is characterised as a sturdy and resolutely independent entity, and the dependency of the woman and children on the male is both healthy and appropriate (Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992). Economic dependency as a pejorative only relates to public dependency. The problem of sole motherhood is therefore symbolic of the wider political debate about the family. Anxieties about increasing proportions of sole mother families tend to involve not just a questioning of existing social policy but a more generalised concern about the changing terrain of family (Moore 1996; McIntosh 1996; Phoenix 1996; Smart 1996; Land & Lewis 1998).

This juxtaposition of family conservatism, radical economic restructuring and welfare reform creates a contradictory environment in 'liberal welfare regime' countries for sole mother families. As Carol Smart (1997) notes, there is an irony in political policy that simultaneously rushes to restructure society according to market forces but then assumes that the family is the one institution that must not change. Radical economic changes wrought by increasing market integration and globalisation are counterpoised against a tendency to portray the family as an autonomous unit that is responsible for its own relations with the market. Thus if the family cannot support itself then this failure is an individual one and may be attributed to a lack of effort, especially in relation to labour market participation and/or to the dysfunctional nature of the particular family unit (Moore 1996). This contradiction is most evident in welfare reform debates that correlate increasing levels of welfare receipt with the idea of a poor work ethic among recipients (Mann & Roseneil 1994; Smart 1997; Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992). Political discourse around the family, sole mothers and welfare reform can, therefore, be viewed as an adjunct to the dominant economic discourse. The combined operative effect of these changing discourses is a major redefinition of the relationship between the market, the family and the state.

## **1.5 Scope and Limitations**

As outlined in the introductory section of this chapter, the central question of this thesis asks if the relationship of Australian sole and married mothers to the labour market is different. This overarching enquiry is then split into three sub-questions, representing the ideological, practical and fiscal dimensions of sole and married mothers' relationship to the labour market. The range of this investigation means that the scope of this thesis is necessarily broad. The three dimensions of the central question need to be explored from both the perspective of the individual sole mother and her family as well as from a wider economic, political and social theoretical framework. These two elements, the micro and the macro, are fundamentally linked. The micro-perspective encompasses the practical, ideological and social context in which sole mothers make decisions about market work. The macro element explores the nexus of states, markets and sole mother families, emphasising the changing public and political discourse on the appropriate relationship between sole mothers

and the labour market. Thus, the micro elements of sole mothers' choices and decisions operate within the macro environment.

Yet, most existing Australian and overseas studies of sole mothers tend to concentrate only on the micro, or what Duncan and Edwards (1999, p. 6) refer to as the 'closed boxes of decontextualised individual variable-based correlations'. That is, they commonly analyse sole mothers as a taxonomic group, without reference to the broader social structure or processes. As such, they can tell only half the story at best. The changing ideological and political dimensions of the dominant discourse on sole motherhood, the family, the market and the state provide an increasingly important social milieu within which sole mothers must live their lives. Dominant discourses, by their nature, impose definitions on what sole mothers are, how they should behave, how they are perceived within society, and perceptions of what is an appropriate provision of social resources. Thus, an examination of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market must include an exploration of these micro and macro facets. The scope of the thesis, and the theoretical framework on which it draws, must by necessity be broad enough to encompass all these elements.

The very breadth of the scope of the thesis provides its own limitations. To ensure that the necessary empirical and conceptual underpinnings for both the micro and macro perspectives are adequately addressed, the theoretical chapters first detail the comparative characteristics and circumstances of Australian sole mothers, and, second, explore the position and positioning of sole mothers within the dominant family, economic and welfare reform discourses in Australia. Yet, despite this attempt to draw an extensive conceptual and empirical canvas against which to explore the nature of sole mothers' relationship to the labour market, the scope of this thesis is still confined. Many issues which might easily fit within this analysis, such as falling fertility rates in Australia and other western industrialised nations, the subsequent 'crises' of a rapidly aging population, the changing nature of work and work practices within the Australian labour market, or even issues related to the provision of appropriate, affordable child-care, can only be briefly, or peripherally, addressed.

The analytical approach taken in this thesis is fundamentally quantitative. This approach is both a strength and a constraint. On the one hand the use of the NLC

data, as a nationally representative dataset, provides results that are large-scale and able to be generalised to the wider Australian population. On the other, although the NLC dataset contains very detailed data on how Australian families negotiate work and family life, including a wide range of attitudinal data, the analysis is constrained by the categorised nature of the respondents' replies to the individual survey items. There is no opportunity within an established dataset such as the NLC to ask for further details of respondents or to seek broader clarification of meaning. Thus, the analysis is limited to the responses provided within the dataset. Similarly, the secondary nature of the analysis is also limiting. While the use of the dataset provides valid and valuable data on the relationship of Australian sole mothers to the labour market, the NLC was not designed specifically for this purpose. This means that some data, which would have aided the analysis, are not available. For example, in the 1996/97 first wave of the NLC used in this thesis, the battery of questions relating to housework were asked only of those mothers currently living with a partner. Thus the amount of time spent by married and sole mothers on unpaid work cannot be compared. Later waves of the NLC have extended this set of items to all respondents.

## **1.6 Definitional Issues**

There are a number of conceptual issues and descriptive terms used in this thesis that require definition and clarification. These are outlined below.

The first of these is the restriction of the examination to mothers. In particular, sole mothers specifically, rather than sole parents more generally, are the focus of the analyses. Consequently, the terms 'sole mother', 'sole motherhood' and 'sole mothering' are used unless referring to data on sole parents that is undifferentiated by gender. Male sole parents are excluded for a variety of reasons. The major of these is the nature of the analysis, which fundamentally revolves around a comparison of sole and married mothers. The minority status of sole father is also a factor. Current figures (ABS 2002a) estimate that around 11 per cent of sole parents are male and, despite the increasing focus on the role of fathers in children's lives, the data indicates that the gender break-up of sole parents is not becoming more even. ABS (1992) data indicate that the proportion of sole father families actually decreased between 1969 and 1991, although the percentage of sole parent families rose



significantly during this period (cited in Bryson 1994). The differing statistical profile of sole fathers is also important. Australian sole fathers have income, demographic and labour force characteristics which are distinct from female sole parent families. In contrast to sole mothers, sole fathers are older, tend to have older adolescent children in their care, and have higher incomes and lower rates of reliance on income support (ABS 1997a). Sole fathers are also significantly more likely to be in the labour force than sole mothers, although their participation rate is less than that of fathers in couple families (ABS 1998a). Thus, the inclusion of sole fathers would operate to effectively reduce the validity and usefulness of the analyses. However, many of the issues, theoretical concepts and findings identified in this study may also apply to sole father, as well as sole mother, households.

Second, within Australian family formation, labour market participation and related data, the term used to describe and define sole and married mothers varies. In the case of sole mothers, while the definition used in this study's later analyses are quite specific and operationalised in detail in Chapter Five, the term 'sole mother' is used more generally in the introductory and literature chapters. Depending on the country of origin of the literature or the source of the statistical data, sole mothers are variously termed lone parents, lone mothers, sole mothers or single mothers. For example the ABS now tends to use 'lone parent', although such data is then usually segregated by gender. In Australia, the term 'sole mother' is the one most commonly used, especially in social policy literature and is chosen as the major term of reference in this thesis for this reason. In line with the ABS definition, the term 'sole mother', or 'sole parent', refers to those parents who belong to a family that consists only of themselves and one or more of their children (ABS 1998a). Also, unless otherwise stated, the data presented refer to those sole parent families with dependent children. Dependent children are defined by the ABS as:

All family members under 15 years of age; family members aged 15-19 attending school or aged 15-25 attending a tertiary educational institution full time (except those classified as husbands, wives or lone parents (ABS 2000a, p. 42).

Additionally, in ABS labour force statistics, all mothers from couple families, including those in a de facto relationship rather than a registered legal marriage, are

referred to as married mothers (ABS 2000a). 'De facto relationship' refers to a relationship between two people who live together in a consensual union who are not registered as married to each other (ABS 2002a). Therefore, although the definition of the term 'married mother' is more precisely conceptualised in Chapter Five for the current study's analyses, for the purposes of the earlier empirical and conceptual chapters, the term 'married mother' can generally be taken to also include those in de facto relationships.

Third, the use of the term 'welfare' requires clarification. In recent years the term has been imported to Australia and has come into common usage in the description of both social security income support payments and the recipients of those payments. Given the generally pejorative nature of the term 'welfare', my own preference is for the earlier terms, 'income support' or 'social security'. While these terms still have some currency, to maintain a level of consistency with the terminology of the various discourses on sole mothers and state support, this thesis also uses the terms 'welfare' and 'welfare dependency' in its discussion.

Fourth, along with welfare reform, a major feature of the discussion is the rising influence of right wing economic ideologies that include a commitment to a minimising of the role of the state and maximising that of the market. This phenomenon is variously described in the literature as 'economic rationalism', 'neo-liberalism', 'economic liberalism' and 'the New Right'. This thesis follows the lead of O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) in favouring the use of 'neo-liberalism', in that this term emphasises the lineage of this form of economic and social policy to earlier forms of liberalism such as *laissez-faire*. Additionally, in some sections, the terms 'social class', 'working class' or 'middle class' are used as categories to distinguish mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds from those with more family-advantaged circumstances. In this context, the term refers simply to a social group who share a roughly similar position in the economic hierarchy (Bilton et al. 1996).

Finally, the connection between mothering and motherhood is also pertinent. While a legal connection between mother and child is applicable to motherhood, mothering remains inherently connected to caring activity (Silva 1996a). Motherhood is a noun, but mothering is most definitely a verb and is defined by the 'doing' associated with

it. Therefore, while the terms ‘motherhood’ and ‘sole motherhood’ are commonly used in this thesis, these terms should be taken to include the mothering activity integral to female parenthood, rather than referring only to an intrafamilial relationship.

## **1.7 The Structure of the Thesis**

The central core of this thesis is a comparative examination of the micro- and macro-perspectives of sole mothers’ relationship to the labour market. The nexus between these two perspectives is fundamental, but while the dominant themes of each are strongly entwined in order to provide a greater clarity, each is explicated separately. This analytical framework, in turn, dictates the structure of the thesis. Broadly, the thesis moves from an examination of the macro-perspective of the discourses of welfare reform, sole motherhood, market and families in Australia to a more specific micro-discussion of the unique relationship between sole mothers and the paid labour market. The overarching question of the thesis relating to sole and married mothers’ comparative relationship with the labour market is drawn from this discussion. The sub-questions developed from three major dimensions of this main question are then addressed using data from the NLC 1996/97 survey. In the last chapters the links between the macro- and micro-perspectives are redrawn in the light of the study’s results. As in the lived experience of sole motherhood, the macro, in effect, wraps or envelops the micro.

Chapter Two begins the analyses by providing an overview of the literature relating to Australian sole mothers. This chapter draws on the large body of existing descriptive empirical data on the characteristics of sole mothers. Aggregate data on the overall patterns and trends of sole motherhood are presented, including basic demographic and socio-economic characteristics, as well as the historical and current connection between sole mothers/parents and the Australian social security system. Social trends in both social attitudes towards, and the actuality of, Australian mothers’ connection to the labour market are also explored, along with the labour force participation patterns of sole and married mothers.

While these aggregate data are useful in indicating overall patterns, their validity as a base for examining the comparative nature of sole mothers’ relationship with the

labour market is limited. The data operate as if the taxonomic category – sole mothers – accurately delineates the social group. More importantly, they tend to analyse the category of sole mother in isolation from concurrent social, political and economic change. A review of these contemporary contextual settings is the focus of Chapter Three. Here, the current Australian welfare reform process is detailed and the position of sole mothers within welfare reform discourse and consequent social policy program is explored. The links between this discourse and the dominant economic and family discourse and policy directions are also made explicit. The contradictory dichotomising of mothers, within both the discourse and the accompanying social policy, into those who are partnered and those who are not, is highlighted in this section. While married mothers are encouraged to stay out of the workforce, sole mothers are now obligated to seek employment. Despite similar parental obligations, in social policy terms, married mothers are increasingly defined by their mothering role, while for sole mothers the category of welfare dependent is emerging as the primary classification. The central question of the thesis, that is whether sole mothers' relationship with the labour market differs from that of married mothers, emerges from this discussion.

Chapter Four develops the analytical framework. This framework incorporates both the micro- and macro-perspectives implicit in the thesis's central question. For the micro-perspective, the framework is constructed from two major components. First, an understanding of the needs of all households for an input of both time and money for effective family functioning is proposed as fundamental to the examination of mothers' labour market activity. Elements of Becker's (1981) household production model and Vickery's (1977) theory of time poverty are used to develop the concept of the income/time conundrum faced by mother households in trying to balance these dual needs. The second element develops this theme, focusing on how mothers make decisions about market work. Duncan and Edwards' (1999) concept of 'gendered moral rationalities' – that is, mothers' moral and ideological understandings of socially negotiated and contextualised concepts of the 'right' combination of motherhood and paid employment – is proposed as a framework to examine mothers' market activity decisions. Therefore, both of these elements have, at their base, the primary concepts of rationality and motivation for maternal labour market activity. The conceptual framework for the macro-perspective explores the link between welfare regime typology, labour market participation and household levels of

material well-being. A model for understanding the interaction between these factors, Duncan and Edwards' (1999) theory of 'genderfare', is proposed and its applicability to the Australian context is developed. From this composite analytical framework, the ideological, practical and financial dimensions of the central question are established and the sub-question associated with each of these dimensions is posed. Chapter Five outlines the data and methods used to explore these three sub-questions. The initial analyses, exploring similarities and differences of the NLC 1996/97 sample of sole and married mother respondents across a range of demographic, social and personal characteristics, are also detailed in this chapter.

The next three chapters address the ideological, practical and financial dimensions of the study's overarching question. In each, the theoretical and empirical discussion around the specific dimension is first widened and then the results of the analyses of the sub-question are presented. Chapter Six addresses the first dimension through an examination of sole and married mothers' orientation to motherhood. In this chapter the costs, consequences and context in which all mothers negotiate the competing maze of ideologies around paid work and motherhood is first examined. Then the attitudes and values of the sole and married mothers towards their mothering role in the context of labour market participation are analysed and compared in the light of mothers' gendered moral rationalities relating to the compatibility of paid work and their mothering role.

In Chapter Seven these analyses are extended to address the second dimension of the study, sole and married mothers' orientation towards the labour market. In the first section of this chapter, the constant, complex and time consuming nature of parental work, along with its invisibility for sole mothers in social policy, is considered. In the second section, using data on past and current employment experiences and comparative data relating to attitudes, values and expectations of respondents around paid work, sole and married mothers' experience of paid work, attitudes towards labour market participation and reasons for current employment status are investigated. In particular, the impact of the income/time conundrum on mothers' ability to participate in the labour market is explored.

Chapter Eight addresses the third dimension of the study's main question, the efficacy of labour market participation for sole and married mother households. First,

the assumed link between employment activity and material well-being in sole mother families is investigated through an examination of recent empirical data and literature on this topic. Second, the relationship between labour market participation, partnered status and other characteristics of sole and married mothers and level of household material well-being is explored through an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis of these variables against three measures of household material well-being.

In Chapter Nine, the results of the analyses from Chapters Six, Seven and Eight are drawn together and discussed in relationship to the broader implications of the micro- and macro-perspectives. Explanations for the differences between sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market are proposed in this chapter. This discussion addresses the overarching question of the thesis, finding that sole mothers' relationship to the labour market is more complex than that generally allowed in the contemporary discursive social policy debate. The labour market decisions of sole and married mothers are based around a very similar range and mix of social, practical and economic aspects. For both groups, motherhood is the central defining feature of each dimension of their relationship to the labour market. Yet, despite this similarity, the social, political and personal environment in which labour market decisions – the domain of that motherhood – are very different for sole and married mothers. These conclusions suggest that the current response to sole parenthood, within both the Australian discourse of welfare reform and the consequent social policy, is misplaced.

Chapter Ten concludes the thesis. In this chapter a range of alternative social policy perspectives are developed, and areas of further research need are identified. The final discussion speculates on the future direction of Australian welfare reform and its possible impact on sole mothers' relationship to the labour market.

## Chapter Two: Australian Sole Parents

### 2.0 Introduction

Social and political concern with rising proportions of sole mothers has meant that the characteristics and circumstances of Australian sole parent families have been extensively researched. There is now a substantial body of empirical data at the level of aggregate description. The first section of this chapter reviews these data in relation to the major demographic, educational and socio-economic characteristics of Australian sole parent families. The second section overviews the development of social security support for sole parents in Australia and current patterns of benefit receipt. In the third section, the labour force participation patterns of sole and married mothers are outlined and major trends identified. The data are drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), government departments, previous studies of sole parents, and, where appropriate, from international sources.

The aggregate data presented here are important in indicating overall patterns and trends and in describing the basic shape of sole motherhood in Australia. However, as Duncan and Edwards (1999) point out, categorical data have significant limitations. First they cannot describe process, tending instead to depict characteristics after the event. Second, the data often operate as if the taxonomic category accurately delineate the social group, encompassing all members within a similar set of social positions, relations and behaviour. These limitations need to be particularly borne in mind when describing Australian sole mothers. Sole motherhood is, for most, a temporary status, usually preceded and often followed by partnered motherhood. Such data also tend to present sole motherhood in isolation of concurrent changes in the economic and social arenas. In this, the analysis risks slipping into psychologism – That is, looking to the characteristics of the individual sole mother as explanation of her social position.

So, while a statistical profile reveals important patterns and trends, these data merely describe characteristics of Australian sole mothers. They do not offer an explanation

for sole motherhood or relay the complexity and diversity of the lived experience of Australian sole mothers. The many important implications inherent in these data, and their connection to the central question of this thesis, are developed in the following chapters.

## 2.1 Rising Proportion of Sole Parents

The last three decades have witnessed dramatic shifts in the structure and composition of Australian families. A major feature of this change is the rising proportion of sole parent families. Although no longer escalating at the very high rates seen in the 1970s and early 1980s, the upward trend shows no sign of abating. Sole parent family numbers have increased an average of five per cent per year since 1989, and at current rates are projected to reach over one million by the year 2021 (ABS 2001a; FaCS 1998). The historic data detailed in Table 2.1 illustrates this pattern.

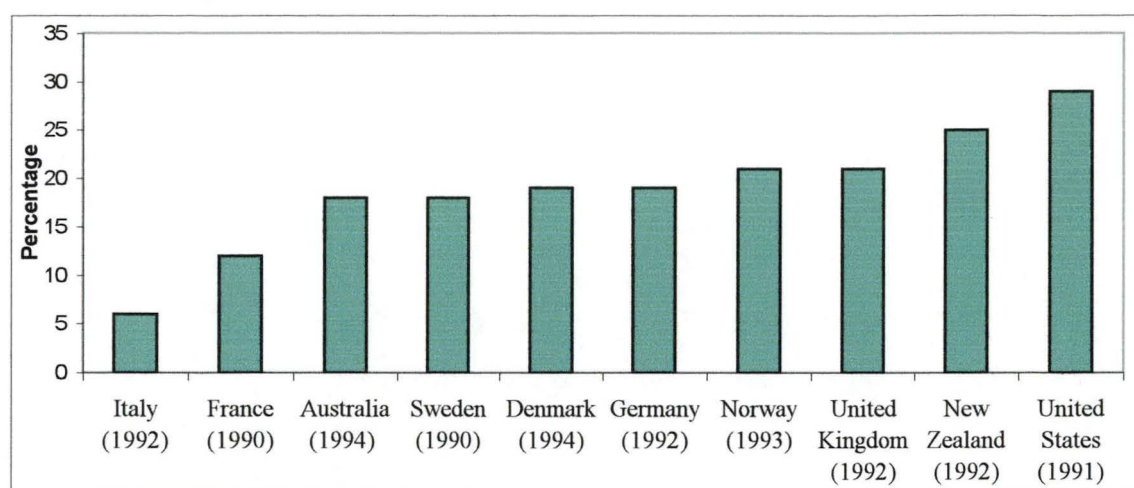
**Table 2.1: Growth in Australian Sole Parent Families 1974 – 2000**

Year	Sole Parents as Percentage of Families with Dependent Children under 15	Children under 15 in Sole Parent Families as Percentage of all Dependent Children under 15
1974	9.2	n.a.
1979	12.8	10.9
1984	14.3	12.2
1989	14.5	12.4
1994	17.2	15.3
1996	18.3	16.3
1998	21.5	19.5
2000	20.9	18.2

Source: Adapted from ABS Cat. No. 6224.0 1998 – 2001 and Saunders & Matheson 1990.

Similar increases in sole parent numbers have occurred throughout the western world. As can be seen from Figure 2.1, Australian percentages of sole parent families are below those of most other English speaking countries including New Zealand, similar to Sweden, Denmark and Germany, but well above other European countries such as France and Italy (Whiteford 1997).



**Figure 2.1: Sole Parents as a Percentage of all Families: Selected Countries**

Source: Bradshaw et al. 1996.

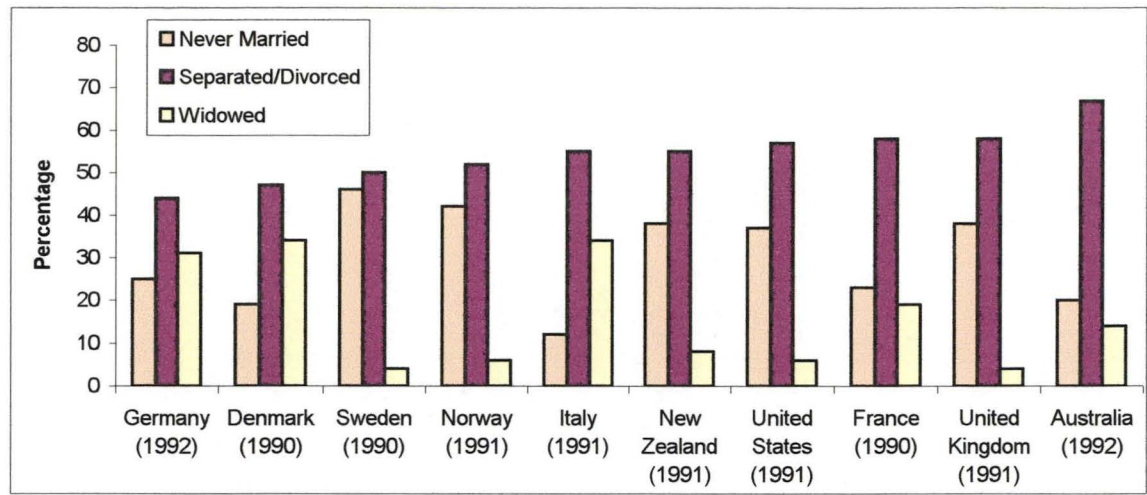
## 2.2 Demographic Characteristics

While Australian sole parent families come from all social and ethnic backgrounds, a descriptive profile reveals some consistent demographic patterns.

### 2.2.1 Pathways to Sole Parenthood

Most Australian sole parent families are formed as the result of marital dissolution. Recent figures indicate that around 64 per cent of sole parents are divorced or separated from a registered marriage, around seven per cent are widowed, and approximately 27 per cent have never married (FaCS 1998). Even within the relatively small never-married group, many sole parent families were previously two-parent families based around a de facto relationship. Estimates suggest that approximately 50 per cent of ex-nuptial births actually occur to de facto couples (McDonald 1995). While separation and divorce constitute the main pathways to sole parenthood in all English speaking countries, Australia has a significantly higher ratio of formerly married sole parents. This variation is, in the main, attributable to Australia's generally lower rate of ex-nuptial births (de Vaus & Wolcott 1997). The proportion of never-married Australian sole parents rose from 19 to 27 per cent between 1982 and 1992. Despite this rise, as shown in Figure 2.2, on an international comparison, Australian proportions of never-married mothers sit within the middle rankings. Conversely, Australia has the highest proportion of separated/divorced sole mothers (Bradshaw et al. 1996; Whiteford 1997).

**Figure 2.2: Marital History of Sole Mother Families: Selected Countries c. 1990**



Source: Adapted from Bradshaw et al. 1996.

**2.2.2 Ethnicity**

The rate of sole motherhood among Australian-born women is higher than that for those born overseas and sole mothers are more likely than partnered mothers to have Australian-born parents (Barrett 1999). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, mainly due to high Indigenous rates of ex-nuptial births, are also over-represented among sole mothers. Current data estimate that around 37 per cent of all Aboriginal families with dependent children are sole mother families, a figure approaching double the national rate (Whiteford 1997; de Vaus & Wolcott 1997).

**2.2.3 Age Groups**

Sole mothers tend to be both slightly older and slightly younger than married mothers. For example, in 1996 over 12 per cent of sole mothers were aged between 15 and 24 years compared to around four per cent of couple mothers. On the other hand, around 19 per cent of sole mothers were aged 45 years and over compared to 17 per cent of couple mothers (ABS 2001b). This contradiction is explained by the variation of routes into sole motherhood. Divorced or separated sole mothers tend to be older than partnered mothers, but never-married sole mothers are on average younger than couple mothers (Barrett 1999). Yet, contrary to the stereotypical picture of the young unmarried sole mother, only around three per cent of sole parents receiving income support are teenagers (McHugh and Millar 1996). In line with the rising age at first birth among all Australian mothers, the average age of Australian

sole mothers is also rising, increasing from 28 years in 1975 to 33 years in 1994 (ABS 1998a).

### 2.2.4 Children

Sole parent families have fewer children on average than couple families. Around half of sole parent families have one dependant child, one third have two children and only 16 per cent have three or more dependants. In comparison, only a third of couple parents have only one child (Saunders and Matheson 1990; Whiteford 1997). The proportion of sole parent families with pre-school aged children is also smaller. In 1996, 35 per cent of sole mothers had a youngest child aged 0 to 4 years compared to 43 per cent of couple families with a youngest child aged less than 5 years (ABS 2001b). This difference again reflects the differing routes into sole parenthood. The majority of sole parents are formerly married parents and their children are older when they enter sole parenthood.

### 2.2.5 Educational Levels

Studies also typically report that sole mothers have comparatively lower educational qualifications (see Colledge 1990; Perry 1992). A recent FaCS survey finds that only around 20 per cent of sole parent income support recipients hold a vocational or post school qualification (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999). These data are confirmed by ABS comparisons. As shown in Table 2.2, post school qualifications are higher among married mothers than among sole mothers. This divergence in qualification level is most obvious in the higher qualifications. Again, this is an international phenomenon. OECD data indicate that throughout the western world, married mothers, in general, are more likely to hold a post school qualification than sole mothers (Bradshaw et al. 1996).

**Table 2.2: Education Level–Sole and Married Mothers**

Level of Education	Sole Mothers	Couple Mothers
	%	%
Have no post school qualification	66	58
Basic or skilled vocational qualification	16	16
Associate or undergraduate diploma	8	10
Bachelor degree	10	16

Source: Adapted from ABS 1997 data, cited in FaCS 1998.

## 2.3 Economic Position

Sole parenthood and poverty are firmly linked. While the conceptualisation of poverty and how it is determined is, itself, contested, studies overwhelmingly confirm high levels of relative poverty among sole parent families. Depending on the measure used, it is generally estimated that about 50 to 60 per cent of Australian sole parent families live in poverty (Saunders 1994; Shaver 1998). ABS (1992) data find that sole parents make up almost half of those in the poorest 20 per cent of the community. This poverty rate is higher than for other groups substantially reliant on income support payments, such as the aged, and much higher than that of couples with children. For example, the 1994-95 average weekly income for sole parent households was only \$385 compared to \$969 for couple families with dependent children (ABS 2001c). This poverty of sole parent families extends past monetary income into other areas of material well-being such as housing. Sole parents are only around half as likely to own, or be buying, their own home as couple parent households. Around half of all sole parents live in rented accommodation compared to only 20 per cent of couple parents; among these renters, a substantial proportion are in public housing (Saunders 1990; McHugh & Millar 1996; Whiteford 1997). Sole parents also have proportionally higher housing costs, spending around 42 per cent of their income on housing compared to 21 per cent for couple families (ABS 2000b).

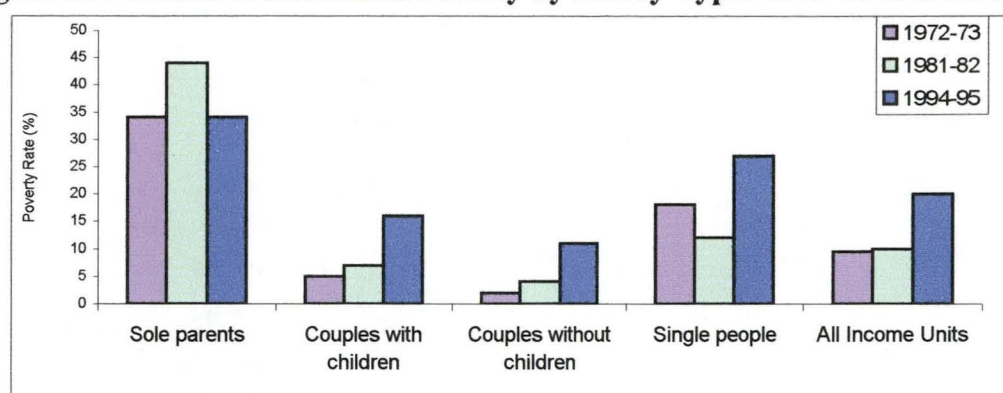
### 2.3.1 Changes to Levels of Poverty in Sole Parent Families

While relative poverty is a longstanding feature of Australian sole parent families, there is some evidence that poverty levels declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example Harding (1998) reports that while children in female-headed families were three times as likely to be in poverty as children in families headed by a male in 1982, by 1997-98 this figure had improved to twice as likely. Similarly, Johnson and Hellwig (1995) find that, in absolute terms, sole parents were the biggest beneficiaries of increases in the social wage in the period 1981/82 to 1993/94. Both studies attribute this improvement in material well-being to increases in social security support, rising values of non-cash benefits, such as health, education, housing and childcare subsidies, and additional child support payments from the



1989 introduction of the Child Support Scheme. These trends are demonstrated in Figure 2.3.

**Figure 2.3: Trends in Australian Poverty by Family Type: 1972-73 to 1995-96**



Source: Saunders (1998a)

Although sole parent poverty in the mid-1990s was not as high as in the 1980s, this reduction only returned rates to those of the 1970s. Sole parents remained clearly the poorest group in Australia (McHugh & Millar 1996; Saunders 1998; Harding & Szukalska 2000). There is also recent evidence to suggest that the improved position of sole parent families has reversed since 1996. NATSEM data (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell 2001) indicate that while child poverty declined in the first half of the 1990s, it rose sharply in the second half, with children in sole parent families identified as the group most at risk. Similarly, a recent ABS (2001b) study finds that the greatest level of financial stress is found among the households of sole parents with dependent children.

### 2.3.2 Gender and Sole Parent Poverty

Poverty among sole parents also generally refers to poverty among sole mothers. Sole fathers make up around 11 per cent of sole parents but only six per cent of those in receipt of income support (FaCS 1998). The ABS (2001b) also reports sole fathers as financially better off, recording an average weekly income of \$506 compared to \$385 for sole mother families. This differential is explained, to some extent, by the greater labour market participation of sole fathers, which is itself linked to the tendency of sole fathers to be caring for older, often adolescent children.

However, this obvious link between gender and poverty may not be as clear-cut as it appears. Shaver (1998) argues that while gender is clearly central to continuing high levels of sole parent poverty, being the sole carer of dependent children is a more

important determinant than sex. This claim is validated, she maintains, by poverty data indicating that sole fathers are also more likely to be poor than partnered fathers. A recent survey of divorced Australians adds weight to this assertion. Here, younger sole fathers emerged as the most disadvantaged group of men, and, more importantly, the economic circumstances of these sole fathers reflected those of younger sole mothers (Weston & Smyth 2000). It appears, therefore, that in circumstances where younger fathers' experience of sole parenthood resembles that of younger mothers – that is, having the sole care of younger children without the economic advantage of longer term labour market experience – then their levels of poverty are also similar. This finding suggests it is the experience of sole parenthood itself, rather than gender that leads to economic disadvantage. As Shaver (1998) notes, those sole parents who commits themselves to full-time parenthood will, by definition, be poor unless they are able to call upon substantial non-income support resources.

## **2.4 Sole Mothers and the Australian Social Security System**

Although age and disability pensions were federally legislated as early as 1908, social support for sole mothers did not eventuate until the Federal *Widows Pension Act* of 1942. Under this legislation, a widow's pension was payable to women with children under 16 years of age who were widows from a registered marriage, or a de-facto relationship of at least three years' standing. Separated and divorced women were also entitled to a widow's pension but had to first prove that they had been deserted by their husbands and, second, serve a six-month waiting period before they were entitled to payment (Carney & Hanks 1994). This legislation, therefore, had a strong moral framework and the type of sole mother deemed worthy of support was highly prescribed. Explicitly excluded were those not considered to be of 'good character'. Married women who had deserted or agreed to separate from their husbands, women whose husbands were in prison, those separated from de facto relationships and unmarried mothers were expressly defined as undeserving (Carney & Hanks 1994).

The 1973 introduction of the Supporting Mothers Benefit saw income support entitlements expanded to all categories of sole mothers. The 'good character' provision of the *Widows Pension Act* was removed in 1974, but widows and deserted

wives remained segregated from other recipients in different payment streams. Eligibility was further extended to male sole parents in 1977 through the replacement of the Supporting Mothers Pension with the Supporting Parents Pension, but the six-month waiting period for non-widows was not disbanded until 1980. In 1989, the categorical division of payments by pathway into sole parenthood was finally abolished with the amalgamation of the Supporting Parent's Benefit and the Widows Class A Pension into the Sole Parents Pension. At the same time, entitlement to Widows B and C pensions for those without dependent children was phased out (Colledge 1990). The most recent version of the major income support payment available to Australian sole parents is the Parenting Payment (Single). This payment was introduced in March 1998, amalgamating the previous Sole Parent Pension with the Parenting Allowance, the payment made to the main carer of children in low income or income support dependent couple families (FaCS 2001). These changes are summarised in Box 2.1.

#### **2.4.1 Eligibility for Income Support**

The essential entitlement criteria for Parenting Payment (Single) is to: have sole care of a dependent child or children under age 16; have income and assets under certain amounts; and be an Australian resident for at least two years, or be a refugee, or have become a lone parent while an Australian resident (Centrelink 2002). Parenting Payment (Single) is paid in respect of the sole parent and payment for children comes separately in the form of Family Tax Benefit A and Family Tax Benefit B. All payments are subject to income tests, but an assets test only applies to the Parenting Payment (Single). The combination of the overlapping income test and the taxation system can result in sole parents payment very high effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs). High EMTRs can mean little return from increased work effort with estimations that low income families may find themselves no more than 15-20 cents in the dollar better off from higher earnings (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999). Once work costs such as childcare and travel are factored in, the increase in family income may be even lower. The 'poverty trap' engendered by EMTRs has long been identified as a barrier to sole parents' labour market participation (see Colledge 1990; Perry 1992; Whiteford 1997). Despite significant reform, however, sole parent income support measures continue to entail high effective marginal tax rates. Payment rates and details of income and assets tests for 2002 are detailed in Box 2.2.

## **Box 2.1: History of Australian Social Security Support for Sole Parents**

### *1942: Widows Pension introduced*

- Class A for widows with child under 16 years of age
- Class B for widows aged over 50 years without children
- Class C for widows under 50 years without children in necessitous circumstances
- Deserted/separated women not eligible for first 6 months
- No eligibility for unmarried mothers, wives who had left or agreed to separate from their husbands, wives of men in prison and deserted de facto wives

### *1973: Supporting Mothers Benefit introduced*

- Payment extended to all categories of sole mothers after 6 months state support elapsed

### *1977: Supporting Parent Benefit replaces Supporting Mothers Benefit*

- Benefit extended to supporting fathers

### *1980: Six month qualifying period eliminated*

### *1987: Eligibility limited to those with dependent child under 16 years of age*

### *1988/1989: Stage 1 and 2 of Child Support Scheme introduced*

- Stage 1 – June 1988: existing child maintenance court orders can be registered for collection and payment via the Child Support Agency and Department of Social Security
- Stage 2 – October 1999: Child Support formula applied to new child support registrations

### *1989: Jobs Education and Training (JET) Program introduced*

- Provides voluntary employment, education and training assistance and help finding child Available to all but targeted at teenage sole parents, those with a youngest child nearing 16 and those on payment more than 12 months with a youngest child aged 6 or older.

### *1989: Sole Parent Pension introduced*

- Supporting Parents Pension and Widows Class A Pension amalgamated

### *1998: Parenting Payment introduced*

- Sole Parent Pension for sole parents amalgamated with Parenting Allowance
- Two payment streams: Parenting Payment (Single) and Parenting Payment (Partnered)

### *2000: Family Tax Benefit B introduced*

- Mothers/Guardian's Allowance incorporated within Family Tax Benefit B

### *2001: Mutual Obligation*

- From September 2002: Mandatory annual work plan interview with Centrelink adviser for those with a youngest child aged 12 to 15 years
- From July 2003: Mandatory annual work plan interview with Centrelink adviser for those with a youngest child aged 6 years or older
- From July 2003: Mandatory mutual obligation activity of 150 hours over a 6 month period for those with a youngest child aged 13 years or older

### *2002: Single Welfare Payment Stream mooted*



## Box 2.2: Sole Parent Social Security Payment Rates

<b>Payment Type</b>	<b>Rate per fortnight</b>
<b>Parenting Payment (Single)</b> Per fortnight	\$429.40 maximum
<b>Pharmaceutical Allowance</b> Per fortnight	\$ 5.80
<b>Family Tax Benefit Part A</b> Maximum rate per fortnight	\$126.70 per child 0–13 years \$160.72 per child 13–15 years \$ 40.74 per student 16–17 years \$ 54.74 per student 18–24 years
<b>Family Tax Benefit Part B</b> Maximum rate per fortnight	\$108.78 per child 0–5 years \$ 75.88 per child 5–15 years \$ 75.88 per student 16–18 years
<b>Rent Assistance</b> Eligible if pay fortnightly private rent above \$104.58 Maximum rate per fortnight	\$105.00 with 1-2 children \$188.73 with 3 or more children
<b>Conditional Payments</b>	
<b>Education Entry Payment</b> per annum	\$208.00 per annum
<b>Employment Entry Payment</b> per annum	\$104.00 per annum
<b>Pensioner Education Supplement</b> per fortnight	\$ 62.40 (>50% study load)
<b>Pensioner Education Supplement</b> per fortnight	\$ 31.20 (>25% < 50% study load)
<b>Income and Assets Tests</b>	
<u>Parenting Payment (Single)</u> subject to an income and assets test.	
Income Test:	Income received over \$120.00 per week reduces the rate of pension payable by 40 cents in the dollar for each dollar earned.
Assets test :	Homeowners - Full allowance paid if assets up to \$149500 and part Payment available if assets less than \$302500 Non Homeowners - Full allowance paid if assets up to \$257500 and part Payment available if assets less than \$410500
<u>Family Tax Benefit A</u> – Subject to income test but not to an asset test	
Family taxable income over \$31755 per annum reduces the rate of payment by 30 cents for each dollar until the payment reaches the base rate of Family Tax Benefit A. Payment stays at the base rate until family taxable income reaches \$82052 per annum. Each dollar earned over this amount reduces the payment by 30 cents until the payment rate reaches nil.	
<u>Family Tax Benefit B</u>	
The income of the primary earner in a partnered relationship or sole parent is not subject to an income test	

Source. Centrelink 2002, effective December 2002

### 2.4.2 Australian and International Income Support for Sole Parents

While most Western countries provide social support for sole mothers, the way in which sole mothers access that support varies widely. Australia's tradition of a specific income tested payment with eligibility linked to sole parent status is relatively uncommon. Apart from New Zealand and Ireland, most OECD countries support sole mothers through family-based social support provisions. While sole mothers have high rates of receipt of this social support, their entitlement is based on their status as a poor family rather than as a sole mother (Millar 1996). For example, in Norway a non-means tested transitional benefit is paid for one year after becoming a sole parent or until the youngest child is 10 years old, and in France the 'allocation de parent isole' is paid for one year after separation or until the youngest child is three. In both countries, after this initial period, income support is provided via the general social assistance schemes. Similarly, in the United Kingdom the general system of social assistance, Income Support, assists sole parents as part of the broader low-income population (Millar 1996; Whiteford 1997). The overall effect of these systems is not dissimilar to the Australian system. However, Australia's use of a designated sole parent payment makes the social support of sole mothers much more visible within the welfare system.

### 2.4.3 Current Patterns of Sole Parent Income Support Receipt

Sole parent families have the highest reliance on social security of all family types. Around 62 per cent of sole parents rely on government pensions or allowances for their major source of income (ABS 1999b; see Table 2.3) and 77 per cent of all sole parents receive some measure of income support (DSS 1998).

**Table 2.3: Sole Parent Families—Principal Source of Income 1997/98**

<b>Source of Income</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Wage or Salary	33.8
Own Business	1.5
Government Pension or Allowance	61.6
Other Income	2.6
No Income/Not known	0.5

Source: Adapted from ABS 1999b, *Income Distribution*, Australia 1997–98, Cat no. 6523.0.

The majority of Australian sole parents receive social security for at least some period, most beginning receipt in the first year after marital separation (Funder et al. 1993). Along with the growing proportions of sole parent families, the numbers of

sole parents receiving income support has also climbed dramatically in the last few decades, from around 44,000 in 1970 to 372,300 in 1998 (ABS 2001d). Despite this, the proportion of sole parents with welfare payments as their main source of family income has been relatively stable over the last decade (Travers 1998). While Australia's ratio of income support reliant sole parents is relatively high, this rate is still lower than that in the United Kingdom (85 per cent) and New Zealand (89 per cent). It is higher, however, than that in France (37 per cent), Denmark (38 per cent) or Sweden (33 per cent) (Bradshaw et al. 1996).

#### **2.4.4 Duration of Income Support Receipt**

Despite high initial rates of income support reliance, for most sole parents their time in receipt of payment is relatively brief. Statistics relating to numbers of sole parents on income support, therefore, need to be understood in terms of stocks and flows. The number on payment during any year is made up of those remaining on payment, plus new entries onto payment, minus those exiting income support. In 1994/95 cancellations of sole parent pension were equivalent to 38 per cent of the stock of recipients. These flows, rather than the static condition of receiving benefits, are the underlying phenomena determining the number of social security recipients (Whiteford 1997). Sole parent receipt numbers are, therefore, subject to high turnover levels. While recent estimates indicate that the length of sole parent income support receipt is, on average, rising, periods of payment remain quite short. In 1998, the mean duration of persons in receipt of Parenting Payment (Single) was 3.4 years and the mean completed duration for those ceasing payment was 2.2 years. The number of long-term recipients is also comparatively low. Overall, only half of those receiving payment do so for more than two years or more. In 1998, only six per cent of sole parents had been on payment for more than 10 years (DSS 1998; Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999).

Results from research aimed at identifying individual factors that might predict a sole parent's length of payment receipt are inconclusive. Funder et al. (1993) found pre-separation socio-economic status was related to shorter spells, but educational or occupational backgrounds or age of youngest child were not associated with an extension of time on payments. In contrast, Chalmers (1999) found those aged 25 to 35 years and those with young children at commencement of benefit receipt tended

to longer duration. Chalmer's results are consistent with overseas data. British research (Bryson, Ford & White 1997) found that young age at commencement of welfare receipt is related to longer duration on payment. However, the research also suggests that the reason is not as simple as age but, rather, is linked to work experience, education and the age and number of children. When these factors are taken into account, women who become sole parents at an early age are more likely to enter paid work than others. Overall, the inconsistency of these results indicates, as Funder et al. (1993) conclude, that a predominantly economic model is inadequate in explaining sole parents' level of post-separation income support dependency.

#### **2.4.5 Pathways Away From Income Support Reliance**

While sole mothers generally begin payment following the birth of a child or relationship breakdown, the reasons for termination are more complex. These include reconciliation, repartnering, entry into the labour market, increased earnings, changes of custody or a youngest child turning 16 (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999). However, while around 17 per cent exit payment because of eligible child reasons, for most, the main route away from sole parent benefit is the acquisition of an adequate alternative income through earnings or repartnering.

For a significant proportion, time as a sole parent and time in receipt of sole parent benefits is the same, lasting between the breakdown of one relationship and the formation of another. For example, Funder et al. (1993) find that 34 per cent of those in their longitudinal sample had repartnered within three years and 52 per cent within five years of separation, with 43 per cent exiting sole parent payment due to repartnering. Similarly, Chalmers (1999) reports that repartnering is the most important reason for sole parents to leave income support, accounting for around half of all payment terminations. However, repartnering as a payment exit trigger is more common among some sole parents than others. Chalmers (1999) finds that younger sole parents, those with younger children and those with lower earnings are more likely to exit payment through repartnering. For example, 84 per cent of repartnerers were previously on maximum payment compared to 56 per cent of other exiters. Repartnerers were also less likely to own their own home. While Chalmers acknowledges that these differentials may be linked to this group's lower mean age, these factors do not completely explain the differences. Rather, she suggests, for

younger sole parents with little work experience or other income, repartnering may offer the greatest possibility of leaving income support and improving life circumstances.

The other major route away from income support is earnings from employment. Around 57 per cent of Funder et al.'s (1993) sole parent sample reported earnings above the cut-off level during the eight-year period of the study. In Chalmer's (1999) analysis, 19 per cent of those exiting payment in 1996 did so because they were earning income above the cut-off threshold. Again, Chalmers (1999) identified factors significant in predicting an earnings-related exit from income support. Those living in capital cities, older sole parents and those whose youngest child was older at the commencement of payment were more likely to exit for excess earnings reasons. As can be seen from Table 2.4, the percentage exiting for reasons of income, rather than repartnering, rises with the age of the sole parent at commencement of payment and length of the period in receipt of income support.

**Table 2.4: Reason Sole Parent Payment Exit by Age and Duration of Payment**

<i>Age at Payment Entry and Duration of Payment Spell</i>	<i>Reason for Exit (%)</i>				
	Work	Repartner	No Eligible Child	Other	Total (n)
<i>Aged less than 25 years</i>					
Duration up to 2 years	8.5	64.5	11.2	15.8	2460
Duration over 2 years	14.4	54.8	12.9	17.9	1476
<i>Aged 25-34 years</i>					
Duration up to 2 years	17.5	55.3	10.5	16.7	4121
Duration over 2 years	22.5	39.3	21.5	16.7	1981
<i>Aged 35+ years</i>					
Duration under 2 years	29.8	30.3	21.7	18.2	3238
Duration over 2 years	20.5	18.5	47.1	14.1	1305

Source: Adapted from Chalmers 1999.

## 2.4.6 Returns to Payment

Of course, leaving a sole parent payment does not necessarily equate to a permanent exit from income support. For a large proportion of sole parents, coming off payment is either temporary, or a prelude to receipt of some other form of income support. These conclusions are supported by recent data from Gregory (2003). This research found that while initial payment spells may be short, up to 60 per cent of Australian sole mothers soon return to payment, with many experiencing a series of cycling

spells, continuing for periods up to 18 years. Repartnering, in particular, is an insecure route away from income support. In Chalmers' study, only 32 per cent of those who repartnered did not receive any form of income support the year following exit from a sole parent payment. Twenty-nine per cent were paid income support as part of a couple and 39 per cent again received income support as a sole parent. From these data, it would appear that sole parents tend to repartner with people also on income support or low income, and that these new relationships are often not durable. Exiting income support through employment is also no guarantee of staying off payment. While Chalmers (1999) reports that those who ceased payment because of excess income were less likely to return to income support than those repartnering, around 55 per cent returned to payment within 12 months.

Thus, the work situation of many of employed sole parents is not maintained in the longer term. Being a sole parent, itself, appears to be a major contributor to this employment instability. A 1994 review of Australian sole parents returning to income support found that a major contributing factor was the great difficulty faced in remaining in jobs that lack family friendly work conditions, especially paid leave to care for sick children (Zanetti 1994). These figures are consistent with overseas data that demonstrate the difficulty of permanently leaving income support via labour market activity for sole parents. American studies, for example, indicate that despite a very strong desire of many to stay away from welfare once they obtained work, over a third of the sole mothers needed to return to welfare for continued economic support within two years of exiting (Harris & Edin 2000).

It is important to also note that labour market participation and income support receipt are not mutually exclusive categories. Of all income support recipients, sole parents are those most likely to have income from earnings. While only nine per cent of sole parent income support recipients reported earnings in 1980, this had risen to 22 per cent by 1990 and to 27 per cent by 1996. In turn, the proportion receiving only a part rate of payment increased from 14 per cent in 1993 to 22 per cent in 1998 (Whiteford 1997; DSS 1998; Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999).

## 2.5 Sole Parents and Labour Force Participation

In analysing sole mothers' relationship to the labour market, recent changes in the relationship between motherhood and paid work are an important feature. In the second half of the twentieth century, Australian mothers shifted from being dependents to providers, albeit often secondary ones. The following section outlines the rising rates of labour market participation amongst all Australian mothers and then examines the specific workforce activity of sole mothers in light of these data.

### 2.5.1 Workforce Participation Of Women And Mothers

The labour market participation rate of Australian women increased by over 50 per cent in the last three decades, rising from 40 per cent in the 1970s to 65 per cent in 1998 (ABS 2000a). As the participation rate of single women barely changed in this period, hovering around 66 per cent, this increase is attributed to rising participation from partnered women and, more particularly, mothers with dependent children. Large-scale workforce participation of mothers with dependent children is therefore a relatively new phenomenon. As recently as 1950, only around 10 per cent of Australian wives had a paid job (Evans 2000). As well as the overall increase in labour market activity, mothers also appear to be returning to work at progressively earlier stages in their child's life. ABS (2001) data indicate that in the 1980s, the point at which the majority of mothers returned to work shifted from the primary to the pre-school age group. During the 1990s, the age of the youngest child at a mother's return to work lowered again to between one and two years (*Australian*, 31 August 2001, p.6). These statistics illustrate a substantial transformation, but the nature of maternal participation needs to be considered. While the workforce participation rates of mothers now approach that of women without children, their pattern of employment is very different. The bulk of the employment increase among Australian mothers relates to part-time employment. Australia has experienced the third highest growth of part-time employment in the OECD and women are employed in the majority of these positions. While women make up 42 per cent of all employees, they represent 75 per cent of workers in part-time employment (ABS 1994, cited in Shaver 2000).

Internationally, the employment rate of Australian women is lower than that of many other industrialised countries. The United States and most of the Scandinavian countries record female labour force participation rates well over 70 per cent. At 65 per cent, Australia's rate is similar to, but slightly lower than, that in Britain and New Zealand. The life course pattern of work for Australian mothers also differs. While in the United States and countries like Sweden and Norway, continuity of employment is relatively consistent across the life course, in Australia, female labour force participation is still characterised by two peaks. The first occurs in women's early twenties and represents high participation before child bearing. The second peak, between the ages of 35 and 44, reflects the return of women to employment as their children grow older (OECD 1994, cited in O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999).

### **2.5.2 Ideals Of Mother's Labour Force Participation**

Mothers' employment decisions are, however, not just dictated by the practical consideration of combining the two roles, but also by the moral ideologies surrounding motherhood itself. Integral to these are belief systems and attitudes about the appropriateness and rightness of mixing paid work and mothering responsibilities held by mothers as well as the broader community. Australian social attitudes towards mothers' employment tend to be fairly conservative, with approval for mothers' employment rising in line with their child's age. Evans (2000) reports that on a scale of industrialised nations, Australia ranks twentieth out of 24 in social approval of workforce participation by mothers of dependent children. In data from the 1994/1995 International Social Survey Program, 85 per cent of Australian respondents were in favour of women without children working full time after marriage, but only 4 per cent favoured full-time work for mothers of children under school age. Part-time work has significantly higher community approval, with one-third of respondents approving part-time work for mothers of pre-school age children and nearly three-quarters in favour of part-time work for those with school age children. While only 16 per cent approved of mothers working full time when their youngest child was still at school, this increased to 61 per cent approval for maternal employment after children had left home. In contrast, 48 per cent of Canadians approve of full-time work for mothers of school age children (Evans 2000).



These data are supported by a poll on work and family issues conducted by Saulwick and Associates for the *Age* newspaper before the Federal 2001 election. A majority of respondents thought that being at home with a parent, in preference to attending a childcare centre, gave pre-school children a better start in life (*Age*, 8 October 2001, p. 5). These community views are echoed in the reasons given by low-income mothers for not participating in employment. Wilson, Pech and Bates (1999), in a study of the work attitudes of parenting payment recipients, find nearly three-quarters of those outside the labour market felt that they should be home with children, or that their children were too young for them to re-enter the labour market.

### 2.5.3 Labour Market Participation: Sole and Married Mothers

Since 1980, the labour market participation rate of sole mothers has been consistently lower than that of married mothers. ABS data for June 1999 indicate that around 56 per cent of sole mothers are now in the labour force compared with 63 per cent of married mothers. As can be seen from Table 2.5, sole mother employment rates have risen substantially in the last two decades but these rises are outstripped by increases in the labour market participation rates of married mothers, especially during the 1980s.

**Table 2.5: Labour Force Participation - Sole and Married Mothers**

Year	Sole Mothers	Married Mothers
	LM Participation Rate %	LM Participation Rate %
1974	45	41
1980	43	46
1985	41	51
1990	52	61
1994	52	61
1999	56	63

Source: Adapted from ABS 2000c, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. no. 6203 and Saunders & Matheson 1990.

However, this disparity in sole and married mothers' participation rates is not as unambiguous as it would appear. While similar proportions work full time, fewer sole mothers are in part-time employment and more are unemployed. As outlined in Table 2.6, around 22 per cent of sole mothers with dependent children work full-time and another 25 per cent work part-time. For married mothers, a similar proportion work full-time but a significantly higher proportion (35 per cent) work part-time (ABS 2000c). Thus, the differences in employment rates between the two groups

centre on part-time work rates. Another consistent point of difference is the unemployment levels of sole and married mothers. As shown in Table 2.6, the unemployment rate for sole mothers, of around 16 per cent, is substantially higher than the five per cent rate for married mothers. While the ABS notes that this higher rate is partly the product of lower proportions of sole mothers in the labour market, this difference in rates is a consistent trend. Moreover, the gap appears to be increasing. The unemployment rate of sole mothers has risen during the late 1990s, while that of partnered mothers has remained steady (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999). Higher unemployment amongst sole mothers is also part of the international picture. In Bradshaw et al.'s (1996) cross-national comparison, the unemployment rate of sole mothers was higher than that of married mothers in 19 out of 20 countries, the exception being Portugal.

**Table 2.6: Participation by Work Mode—Sole and Married Mothers**

	Full-time Work	Part- time Work	Seeking Work	Not in Labour Force	Unemploy- ment Rate	Particip- ation Rate
Married Mother						
'000	505.3	678.4	33.6	733		
%	25.6	34.3	3.0	37.0	4.8	62.9
Sole Mother						
'000	108.3	119.1	22.4	214.7		
%	22.3	24.6	8.7	44.3	15.7	55.7

Source: Adapted from ABS 2000c, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. no 6203.0.

Sole mothers' employment rates, similar to that of married mothers, seem to be related to the age of their youngest child (McHugh & Millar 1996; Whiteford 1997; Cass 2002; Gray et al. 2002). As shown in Table 2.7, while only 37 per cent of sole mothers are labour market active when their children are under school age, this rises to 61 per cent for those whose youngest child is between five and nine and to 74 per cent for those with a child aged 10 to 14 years. The number of children is also important. While 60 per cent of sole parents with one or two children are active in the labour market, this drops to 39 per cent for those with three or more children (ABS 2000a).

**Table 2.7: Labour Force Participation by Age of Youngest Dependent Child**

<b>Mother type</b>	<b>0-4 years %</b>	<b>5-9 years %</b>	<b>10-14 years %</b>	<b>15 + years %</b>
<b><i>Sole Mother</i></b>				
Employed Full Time	9.0	22.2	31.4	43.0
Employed Part-time	19.5	30.0	30.3	25.4
Unemployed	8.4	8.3	5.8	6.3
Not in Labour Force	63.1	39.4	32.6	25.5
<b><i>Partnered Mother</i></b>				
Employed Full Time	16.1	25.9	36.7	40.6
Employed Part-time	31.9	40.8	36.1	33.0
Unemployed	3.4	4.6	2.5	1.7
Not in Labour Force	48.6	28.7	24.1	24.6

Source: Adapted from ABS 2000c *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. no 6203.0.

There is very little Australian empirical research on the reasons for the differences between sole and partnered mothers' employment rates. A very recent paper that does address the issue (Gray et al. 2002), finds that the determinants of the probability of employment are very similar for sole and couple mothers. Overall, this study found differences in social and demographic characteristics, (education level, age of youngest child and number of children, migrant status and year of arrival, English language proficiency, Indigeneity, housing tenure and partners' income) between the sole and married mothers only accounted for around a third of the sole mother-couple mother employment gap. Within these data, the presence of children has a similar effect on both groups and the effect of education level was small (2.7 percentage points). Gray et al (2002) conclude that the gap in employment levels between sole and married mothers can mainly attributed to the differing impact of employment-related variables on partnered and sole mothers.

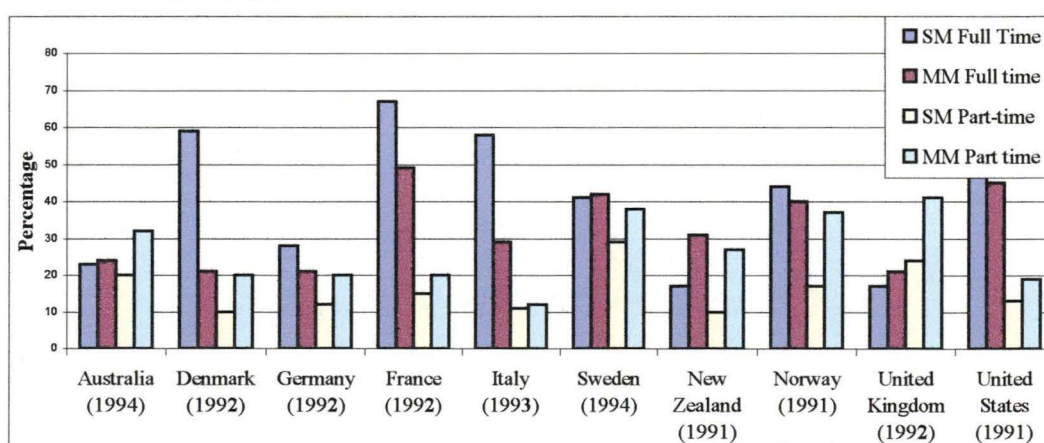
The topic of labour force participation is addressed to some extent in a range of Australian qualitative studies, usually within a wider examination of sole mothers' lives. These studies add a lived experience dimension to the examination of labour market participation and sole motherhood. Morehead (2002) directly address the choices faced by sole mothers in negotiating their mother and worker roles, arguing that sole mothers need to recreate the relationships between their households and workplaces following separation. These new 'sole mother' domestic arrangements require additional labour on the mothers' part to keep the household/workplace relationship viable. Others concentrate on the difficulties inherent in balancing the parenting demands of being a sole mother with employment. For example,

Swinbourne et al. (2000), using an Australia-wide focus group study, raise the concept of a social economy where sole mothers' decisions about labour market activity are made within a framework of the social parenting needs of the family and its financial ones. The risk to family well-being of combining paid work and sole parenting is also identified as a disincentive to workforce participation. Cowling (1998), again using focus groups, finds that sole mothers often judge paid work as not a viable option. In coming to this determination, considerations of the cost in parenting time and children's well-being override the perceived financial benefits that might be gained from labour market activity. The impact of EMTRs (see p. 43) has also been suggested as an explanation for the disparity in part time employment rates between sole and married mothers. Whiteford (1997) for example, proposes that sole mothers behave like married mother in labour market participation but that their part-time participation is reduced because of the negative impact of the combination of benefit withdrawal and EMTRs

## 2.5.4 International Comparisons

The labour force patterns of Australian sole mothers are comparatively different to those in other OECD countries. As can be seen from Figure 2.4, Australian sole mothers' workforce participation rates are lower than in the majority of other Western countries, except for New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

**Figure 2.4: Labor Force Status–Sole and Married Mothers: Selected Countries c.1991-1994**



Source: Adapted from Bradshaw et al. (1996)

Rates of full-time work also tend to be substantially higher among sole mothers compared to married mothers in most countries, with Australia, New Zealand and the

United Kingdom being the exceptions. Conversely, married mothers are more likely to be in part-time work in all countries, including Australia (Bradshaw et al. 1996; Whiteford 1997).

## 2.6 Summary

The demographic, social and economic characteristics of Australian sole mothers exhibit a distinctive pattern. From a socio-economic perspective, sole mothers are a highly disadvantaged group and, despite some improvement during the 1980s and early 1990s, continue to be so. Sole mothers are also the most likely of all family types to be reliant on income support payments. The workforce participation rates and types of employment between married and sole mothers also exhibit distinctively different patterns. Compared to married mothers, Australian sole mothers have lower overall employment rates, approximately equal or higher full-time work rates, significantly lower part-time employment rates and higher rates of unemployment. At least some of these differences appear related to the age of sole mothers, the age of their youngest child or differences in level of education. Yet other data, such as the high rate of return to income support after leaving welfare for employment, plus the higher rates of labour market participation by sole mothers in other OECD countries, suggest that these factors do not offer a complete explanation.

As can be seen from this chapter, the patterns and trends relating to sole mothers have been exhaustively compiled over the last two decades in Australia and other OECD countries. However, when examining these data, it needs to be remembered that the population of Australian sole mothers is not static but, rather, is constantly turning over, as individuals move in and out of sole parent family arrangements. Care must also be taken not to view these aggregate data in isolation. The identified patterns and trends of Australian sole mothers circumstances, especially around labour market participation, need to be examined in their contemporary contextual settings. These contextual settings are the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter Three: Welfare Reform in Australia

### 3.0 Introduction

Australia is following the lead of other English-speaking industrialised nations and instituting a major restructuring of its welfare system. The Australian welfare reform debate and reform initiatives implemented to date take a broadly similar path to that already taken in other 'liberal' welfare regimes. Australian welfare state restructuring is also framed around a similar discourse, one that correlates with the rise of market capitalism, the impact of globalisation and the political and economic dominance of neo-liberal economic theory. Consequently, Australia is now shifting towards a more residual and moralistic welfare state that focuses on absolute need and work incentives. As in other 'liberal' welfare regimes, new forms of social policy have emerged, based on the perceived negative effect of welfare expenditure on the economy and the population. The old Australian welfare state is portrayed as fiscally too expensive, and welfare benefits are deemed to nurture both a culture of dependency and reduced responsibility among claimants (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999).

The current welfare reform process has major ramifications for Australian sole mothers. Sole mothers, along with the unemployed, are now subject to mutual obligation and its attendant requirements. However, the impact of welfare reform and the changing discourse on welfare receipt is substantially different for sole mothers. The welfare reform agenda aims to reinforce the supremacy of the market and this focus clashes with the inherent obligations and responsibilities for the unpaid parenting work of sole motherhood. The soleness of sole motherhood places sole mothers outside the dominant paradigm of 'family'. Although in other English speaking countries the concept of the sole mother as a social threat has been influential in debates for restructuring the welfare system, this emphasis has been less pronounced in Australia. Here, the rationale for welfare reform has tended to be more broadly focused on reducing welfare dependency per se. However, there is now evidence of an emerging negative discourse on sole motherhood which is resonant

with that prevalent in other 'liberal' welfare regimes such as the United States and Britain.

The dichotomising of sole and married mothers into different social policy categories is the focus of this chapter. To provide a context for this discussion, the chapter begins by briefly overviewing the changing position of sole mothers within the Australian welfare state and the current reform process. The shape and context of the welfare reform process is then examined in light of the welfare reform discourse and the underlying values that inform it. Links are drawn between sole parenthood, social class, radical restructuring of the labour market and the basic contradiction between a neo-liberal family policy that encourages mothers into the home and welfare reform policy that enforces labour force activity. The chapter draws these themes together, and in doing so, defines and poses this study's major research question.

### **3.1 From Dependent Carers to Potential Earners**

The distinctive structure and history of the Australian welfare system complicates the application of market-based reforms. The uniqueness of Australia's residualist, non-contributory system of means-tested, low-level, flat-rate payments is located in its historical context. Castles (2000) identifies the strong influence of the labour movement in the late nineteenth Century as a major explanatory factor. Under this influence, poverty issues were defined as 'the problem of wages' rather than in welfare terms and, as a result, wage awards were determined using social policy as well as market forces criteria. Therefore, unlike the European systems that were built around protecting workers from unemployment, sickness and old age, the Australian system was more concerned with job security, wage control and family-based wage rates (Manning 1998). Or, in the parlance of Castles (1985, p. 110), the system that emerged was a 'wage earners welfare state', where, in an era of full employment and a gendered work life cycle, there was little need for other forms of social assistance. An assumption of female dependence, reinforced by low levels of female labour market participation and wage rates, have led writers such as Bryson (1992) to re-name this system the 'male wage earners welfare state'. Under this model, in Esping-Andersen's (1990) terms, women's labour power was effectively decommmodified by the establishment of a family wage.

Therefore, for most of the twentieth century, women with children but without a husband did not 'fit' in the Australian 'male wage earner welfare state' (Bryson 1995). The distinct gendered life course embodied in the system clearly defined a mother's primary role as raising children and caring for the home. The introduction of the Widows' Pension in 1942 reinforced this essential role of women as housewives and mothers, with the state picking up the role of the absent male wage earner. The underlying philosophy of the legislation, articulated by Prime Minister Curtin and other legislators, assumed that labour market activity for widowed mothers could only be at the expense of their own and their children's welfare (House of Representatives Debates, 15 May 1942, p.1307, cited in Carney & Hanks 1994). Even the extension in 1973 of Supporting Mothers Benefit to all sole mothers, regardless of marital history, was framed around this basic premise. Public provision remained predicated on the assumption that sole mothers needed freedom from market work obligations to concentrate on their primary role of raising children (Colledge 1990).

It was not until the Social Security Review of the mid-1980s that this core assumption began to be challenged. Rising sole parent numbers, the increasingly identified poverty of sole parent families, and the more general expansion of women into the labour market, led to a questioning of the idea that sole mothers should be encouraged to stay at home. The Review produced a number of discussion papers directly related to sole parents and employment (see Frey 1986; Raymond 1987; Jordan 1989). These focused on the disparity in labour market activity between sole and married mothers and constraints on the employment capabilities of sole parents. Some identified constraints included: difficulty in gaining secure employment; difficulty in combining paid work with childcare responsibilities; generally low levels of work skills and education; difficulties accessing childcare; high effective marginal tax rates and withdrawal of concessions (Cass 1993). To counteract these barriers, the Review recommended that sole parents be given labour market incentives and opportunities. This change in policy direction, however, was not made easily. The Social Security Review stressed that labour market initiatives be voluntary and therefore the policy was 'consistent with the principle that sole parent social security policy should provide the choice for sole parents to remain outside of paid work' (Cass 1993, p. 8).



Policy initiatives that developed from the Social Security Review were incorporated into the Labor Government's Active Employment Strategy (1989). These included increased assistance for children, reducing the maximum age of a qualifying child from 24 to 16 years, and measures to reduce poverty traps (Colledge 1990). Also introduced was the Jobs Education, and Training Program (JET) aimed specifically at assisting sole parents into the labour market through voluntary individual counselling, access to education, training and employment programs and affordable childcare places (DSS 1994). The corresponding rise of a market orientation in economic and social policy during this period also saw the focus of social policy swing to restricting public expenditure, tighter targeting of payments and increased measures of control, surveillance and review of social security recipients (Shaver 1998; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999; Castles 2000; Jamrozik 2001).

Under this changing focus, the attribution of poverty in sole parent families also altered. From being characterised as the lack of a male breadwinner's wage, such poverty was now viewed as being related to the unmet income needs from non-resident parents and, more particularly, from the sole parent's earnings (Shaver 1998). More critical, however, was the fundamental shift in the gendered assumption of women's dependency and consequent segregation from labour market obligations. The specific provisions within the welfare state for a distinctive female life cycle pattern shaped by wifehood and motherhood were now removed. Writers such as Shaver (1995) argue that the outcome was a system that addressed social rights on a more individual basis, or a 'convergence of the gendered 'his' and 'hers' welfare states (Bryson 1995). Others, such as Mitchell (1997), contend that policy remained based on the male breadwinner model, resulting in a hybrid system where the changing political rhetoric undermined the position of Australian women. Regardless of the benefit, or otherwise, of these changes, their impact was neither universal nor equal. While women's labour was now commodified within the social security system, it was only women *without* partners (sole mothers) who were no longer entitled to 'legitimate dependency' (Bryson 1995, p. 69). In this regard, the reform of the Australian welfare state and the process of labour market participation as a policy solution to the sole parent 'problem' began in the mid-1980s.

### 3.2 The Current Australian Welfare Reform Process

Since the mid-1990s, the process of welfare reform within the Australian welfare state has accelerated dramatically. The 1996 election of the Howard Coalition Government saw the introduction of social and economic policies that shifted the direction of social policy in an even more radically market orientated direction. Working from the free market ideology first outlined in the Hewson and Fischer 1991 manifesto *Fightback!*, one of the first tasks of the new Howard Government was to appoint a National Commission of Audit. Composed of representatives from the finance sector, the Commission's report argued that the government must save more in order to halt the vicious cycle of economic problems, and that this must be achieved by restricting government spending rather than raising taxes. The broader policy and ideological context of a deregulatory labour market, taxation reform and an economic imperative to create a more competitive climate, was, however, in opposition to the state interventionism of the existing welfare state. Thus welfare reform emerged as a major policy issue in Australia (Wiseman 1996; Manning 1998; Saunders, Thomson & Evans 2000, Baker & Tippin 2002).

The twin drivers for Australian welfare reform reflect the same neo-liberal ideological themes raised in other western countries: increasing welfare dependency and the spiralling cost of welfare. Although noting that the Australian welfare system compares well with that of many other countries, the Minister's 1999 Discussion Paper, *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, cites the growth in 'welfare dependency' and the 'culture of dependency' as worrying trends. Increasing proportions of workforce-age people dependent on social security payments are offered as the major evidence of the welfare system's failure. The Australian welfare system, the paper argues, has not kept pace with changing economic, social and demographic trends, and the system embodies outdated assumptions about the structure of work, families and gender roles (Newman 1999). Thus, the problem is a welfare system that is rooted in the past, leading to increasing welfare dependency among work-capable adults. Sole parents feature strongly among those deemed able to better contribute to their own support.

To address this perceived systemic failure, a review of social security arrangements and related services was commissioned in 1999. A reference group, with

representatives from the community sector, business, academia and government, was established to, 'develop policies and strategies to strike a better balance between providing a strong safety net and allowing all Australians to participate fully in the workforce where they are able' (Newman 1999, p. 3). The final report in June 2000 of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (RGWR), *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society* (the McClure Report), agreed that the current system was in need of a dramatic overhaul. The focus of change was on increasing the level of participatory activity by income support recipients, noting that:

Central to our vision is a belief that the nation's social support system must be judged by its capacity to help people participate economically and socially, as well as by the adequacy of its income support arrangements (RGWR 2000, p. 3).

To achieve this vision, the report called for welfare reform based on the development of a Participation Support System. This system contains five key features:

1. individualised service delivery framed around the idea of integrated caseworker services and individual participation plans for welfare recipients;
2. a simpler income support structure based on a common base payment for all recipients and participation supplements;
3. incentives and financial assistance involving the introduction of an integrated participation support payment system and extended in-work benefits;
4. mutual obligations principles extended to all working-age recipients, including sole parents; and
5. social partnerships aimed at the building of social capital in communities and engaging business in the Participation Support System.

Thus, the major thrust of the report was based around increasing welfare-to-work provisions and obligation with the report envisaging that its reform agenda will take at least ten years to accomplish (RGWR 2000).

Given the rhetoric that preceded it, the McClure Report recommendations are relatively uncontroversial. Commentators note that it was likely 'to keenly disappoint conservatives hoping for an ideological scythe to those on benefits' (Steketee 2000, p. 15). While the report adopts the basic framework of welfare reform seen in the United States and Britain, the standard social policy remedies of mutual obligation and an active welfare system are applied less severely. There are no

recommendations for radical welfare reform measures such as lifetime limits on assistance. Indeed, an ACOSS (2000) review notes that the report's affirmation of the central role of the income support system in relieving poverty gives the report considerable strength. The ACOSS critique was, however, not all positive, arguing that the extension of 'mutual obligation' to sole parents was premature and running well ahead of proposals to improve support services such as childcare.

The Federal Government, noting that it was 'committed to the broad direction of the McClure Report' (FaCS 2000a, p. 1), released its Welfare Reform Package, *Australians Working Together*, in the May Budget 2001. As expected, policy changes included the broadening of mutual obligation principles across the welfare system to sole parents, as well as expanding the Job Search, community work and work for the dole programs (Centrelink 2001a). Mutual obligation for sole parents is to be phased in over several years. Beginning in September 2002, sole parents whose youngest child is aged 12 to 15 are required to attend an annual interview with a Centrelink Personal Adviser and develop a return to work plan. From July 2003, this obligation is extended to sole parents with a youngest child aged six or older. Also from July 2003, mandatory participation obligations will come into force. Once a sole parent's youngest child is 13, he/she is required to complete 150 hours of part-time mutual obligation activity over a six month period, or about six hours per week. Such activity can include part-time work, study, training or community work that will prepare the sole parent for employment (FaCS 2001). Participation by sole parents in the employment activity, mandated under mutual obligation, is enforced by breach provisions. The failure of sole parents to participate in an activity will result in a reduction of Parenting Payment (FaCS 2001).

### **3.3 Economic Restructuring and Welfare Reform**

The public policies associated with welfare reform sit within a broader framework of neo-liberalist economic policy. As in other English-speaking countries, the growth in sole parent families and the rise in 'welfare dependency' have occurred in concert with monumental economic restructuring. The synchronicity of these phenomena is not coincidental. With this structural change has also come a shifting of 'the boundaries between core workers, peripheral workers and non-workers; between the individual and the family; and between the citizen and the welfare state' (Dean &

Taylor-Gooby 1992). Yet, within Australian welfare reform discourse, the role of wider economic policy is either not acknowledged at all or is heavily under-acknowledged. Of particular relevance is the radical restructuring of the Australian labour market. This transformation has encompassed shifts in employment among sectors as well as in occupational structure, gender and age composition. Especially prominent has been the growth in part-time, casual and short-term contract work at the expense of permanent full-time jobs. However, the chance of being a part-time, casual low wage worker or unemployed is not evenly distributed. Rather, these trends are gender and occupationally biased, with women and those from blue collar or lower level white-collar jobs most heavily affected.

### **3.3.1 Labour Market Transformation and Welfare Dependency**

Australia now has one of the highest proportions of part-time workers in its labour force in the developed world. More than half of the 1.8 million new jobs created between 1973 and 1993 were part-time jobs, a growth of 164 per cent, and by 1995 around a quarter of Australian workers were in part-time work. In the same 20-year period, the proportion of full-time jobs increased by just 14 per cent (ABS 1994a). While the proportion of male part-time workers is now also increasing rapidly, women make up around three-quarters of those employed part-time. Indeed, ABS (1994a) data indicate that over 90 per cent of the rise in female labour force participation between 1973 and 1993 was due to increased part-time work. In contrast, 43 per cent of Australian female workers were employed part-time in 1995 compared to only 27 per cent of American female workers (OECD n.d, cited in O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). As detailed in Chapter Two, it is women with dependent children who occupy a significant proportion of these part-time positions.

The nature of part-time work is an important aspect of the impact of labour market restructuring. While Australia shares high female part-time work rates with countries such as Sweden and Norway, such comparisons must be made with caution. There is considerable difference in the character and quality of this part-time work. Part-time work in Sweden, for example, is typically of 30 hours' duration, a permanent position with set hours, subject to standard employment protection and considered as the right of employees with child-rearing responsibilities (Bryson 1992; Edwards & Duncan 1996; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). In contrast, most Australian female

part-time workers are restricted to lower level, low skill occupations, have limited promotion chances, receive little training, are unlikely to be permanent, less likely to be covered by an industrial award or aware of their award entitlements, less likely to receive non-wage employment benefits, and less likely to have union representation (Department of Employment Education & Training 1988, cited in O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Thus, while for Swedish women part-time work means part-time hours in 'good' jobs, in Australia, part-time work is mostly located in 'bad jobs' – that is, jobs which are low wage, low skill, low security and of relatively few hours duration.

In Australia, part-time work generally means casual work. In the decade to 1998, 69 per cent of all employee growth was in casual jobs. By 1998, 27 per cent of the Australian workforce was employed on a casual basis, and the average hours worked by casual employees were 23 per week (ABS 2001e) Also, as shown in Table 3.1, part-time work is concentrated in lower skilled and seasonal industries. For example, ABS (2001f) data shows that 58 per cent of jobs in the accommodation, cafe and restaurant sector, 56 per cent in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector, and nearly 50 per cent of all retail, clerical, service and labouring jobs are now casual. In contrast, only around 15 per cent of managerial and professional workers are in casual positions.

**Table 3.1: Employed Person: Ratio of Part-time Workers Australia 1999**

Occupation	Men Part-time %	Women Part-time %
All employed	12.6	44.3
Managers and Administrators	4.1	31.3
Professionals	9.9	32.4
Associate Professionals	6.2	22.6
Advanced clerical and service	14.3	44.5
Intermediate clerical, sales, service	16.7	45.7
Trades, person and related	5.4	37.9
Intermediate production workers	11.3	37.8
Elementary clerical, sales service	40.5	68.4
Labourers and related workers	28.0	59.4

Source: ABS 1999, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. no. 6203.0, (Adapted from Jamrozik 2001, p. 135).

Along with rising casualisation and part-time hours, the proportion of low wage jobs in the Australian labour market has also increased. Again, the impact is greatest on lower-level occupations. Richardson (1999) notes that while the top quintile of male wage earners have experienced real wages growth in the last decade, real wages for

men in the bottom 30 per cent are lower in 1995 than they were in 1975.

Labour market restructuring also exhibits an occupational bias. ABS (1996) data indicate a sustained contraction in blue-collar or lower level white-collar jobs. In the decade to 1995/96 the number of miscellaneous clerk positions fell by 41 per cent and the number of construction and mining labouring positions declined by 20 per cent. In contrast, in the same period, business professional positions grew by around about 90 per cent and miscellaneous professional positions by around 59 per cent. These dynamics are also reflected in unemployment data. In 1996, nearly a third of the unemployed were previously a labourer or related worker and a further 29 per cent were clerks or sales and personal service workers. Recent data confirm these trends. Between 1998 and 2001 more than 83,000 full time jobs in blue-collar, clerical sales and service areas were lost. In contrast, 301,000 full-time jobs were added to managerial, professional and associate professional occupations (ABS 2001, cited in Colebatch 2001).

Thus, for many Australian families, labour market restructuring has resulted in substantial changes in their employment options and opportunities. For those from lower socio-economic social groups, these changes have been overwhelmingly negative. However, under neo-liberalist inspired economic policy, persistent high unemployment and under-employment are categorised as the consequence of an unduly rigid employment system. The policy response is, therefore, to further deregulate wages and working conditions. In line with this emphasis, the associated welfare policy stresses the targeting of benefits and compliance with job search requirements (Shaver 2000). Labour market change and rises in income support reliance are therefore clearly connected but separated in policy and ideology terms. Indeed, in welfare reform documentation, the rising proportion of part-time and casual work is promoted as a positive trend for increasing work opportunities for 'workless families' and the restructured labour market is considered 'flexible and diverse' (Vanstone & Abbott 2002, p. 3).

However, the link between rising numbers of Australians receiving welfare payments and transformations in the labour market is clear. The decline of full-time jobs and the rise of part-time, casual employment means increasing numbers of Australians need to combine part-time wages with part-rate benefits to survive economically.

Thus, there is also an increase in 'welfare dependency', with substantial movement between receipt of welfare payments and low wage work (Henman 2001a; Richardson 1999). As Esping-Andersen (1990) argues, since the 1970s the nature of the relationship between welfare states and labour markets has changed dramatically. The welfare state now aids economic restructuring through its major role in labour market clearing. In effect, the Australian welfare state is underwriting the new 'flexible' labour market and rising welfare dependence must be set against this background.

### **3.3.2 Economic Change and Sole Motherhood**

Family formation patterns in Australia have also undergone a radical transformation. Since the 1970s, reduced rates of marriage, rising age at first marriage, declining fertility rates and rising proportions of sole parent families indicate a radical change in the shape of Australian family life (de Vaus & Wolcott 1997). Yet the distribution of these trends within the population is not even or random. While the major life events leading to sole parenthood – divorce, marital separation and ex-nuptial births – occur at all levels of Australian society, their frequency is greater amongst poorer Australians. For example, recent Australian research finds that the main increase in divorce and separation has occurred amongst Australian men and women from the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. It is women without post-school qualifications who are increasingly likely to have children outside marriage, and the fathers of ex-nuptial children who are more likely to be unemployed (Carberry, Chan & Hayworth 1996; Birrell & Rapson 1998; Birrell 2000; Walter 2000). Within this trend, rates of repartnering are also diminishing. Weston and Smyth (2000) report that the proportion of women repartnering has reduced significantly over the last 10 years; those with the lowest skills and labour market experience are the least likely to form new relationships.

This nexus between low socio-economic status and sole motherhood can be also linked to the impact of economic restructuring. Increased ex-nuptial births, marital separations and reductions in repartnering have all been linked to the decreasing level of financial security among males at the poorer end of the socio-economic scale. Without the ability to offer financial security, the economic imperatives for both men and women to partner and stay partnered are greatly reduced (Birrell &



Rapson 1998; Manne 1998). These contentions are supported by the heavy over-representation of low-income earners amongst non-resident fathers. Child Support Agency data, for example, report that the median income for non-residential parents is just \$18,241 per annum (Australian Taxation Office 1998). Additionally, rates of ex-nuptial births appear to be correlated with economic conditions. Tasmania, with the highest national unemployment rate, lowest weekly median income and lowest tertiary education participation rate, also records a high ex-nuptial birth rate of 40 per cent, significantly above the national rate of 29 per cent (ABS 2001a). These data are, in turn, in line with British research that finds a statistical link between unemployment rates and sole parenthood. As local rates of unemployment rise, so too does the probability of being a sole parent (McKay & Rowlingson 1998).

Therefore, while sole motherhood is certainly not confined to lower socio-economic families, a correlation exists between the likely partnered status of a mother and her position in the socio-economic hierarchy. As Birrell (2000) concludes, Australian mothers are becoming both fewer and poorer, with more women from lower income groups more likely to become both parents and, more importantly, sole parents. Additionally, those women most likely to be sole mothers are also the same group most affected by radical economic restructuring. The implications of these links for Australian sole mother households are clear. Women from lower socio-economic groups are first, more likely to become sole mothers and, second, more likely to be marginalised in the labour market, unemployed or confined to low wage, low skill, low security part-time work.

### **3.4 Fundamentals of Welfare Reform**

The Australian political rhetoric around concepts of spiralling welfare costs, welfare dependency and culture of dependency shares strong similarities with the rhetoric now dominant in the United States, Britain and New Zealand. Given their ubiquitous place in welfare reform discourse, it is worthwhile critically examining these concepts within the Australian context and, especially, as they relate to sole mothers.

### 3.4.1 Welfare: Dependency, Costs and Culture

Concern about rising rates of welfare dependency features prominently in the rationale for Australian welfare reform. Welfare dependency is seen as endemic amongst welfare recipients, including sole mothers. More critically, welfare dependency is seen as contagious, continuing to spread not only amongst the current cohort, but also into future generations, unless the welfare system is overhauled. Figures cited in the Minister's Welfare Reform Discussion Paper indicate that the proportion of working age Australians dependent on welfare payments has risen from around 10 per cent in the 1980s to 18 per cent in 1998. Because of this increase, the costs of the welfare system are spiralling, with the growth in sole parent numbers during this period contributing significantly to increases in both welfare dependency and fiscal outlay (Newman 1999). In line with discourse overseas, the imperative nature of welfare reform is underscored by the perceived dangers of an emerging transgenerational culture of dependency. For example, a recent FaCS paper claimed that: 'there are costs associated with doing nothing as welfare dependency becomes more entrenched in the current population and the associated risks of intergenerational transmission' (FaCS 2000b, p. 5). Although subsequent departmental studies (see Pech & McCoull 2000) find only very limited support for the thesis of Australian transgenerational reliance, the concept remains potent. Also, following overseas discourse, being raised in a sole parent family is viewed as one of the key sources of the promulgation of this intergenerational culture of dependency.

Despite its centrality to welfare reform discourse, however, the definition of what actually constitutes 'welfare dependency' is unclear. As Henman (2001) argues, although the term is used prolifically in government welfare reform documents, there is no attempt to either define the term or provide a framework for its explanation. Whiteford (1997) does attempt a definition but finds more questions than answers. For example, at what level of income support receipt does one become 'welfare dependent'? Does the label apply to those who earn some of their own income? If so, at what point does a recipient stop being 'welfare dependent'? As an example of this conundrum, Whiteford details data indicating that although the number of Australian sole parents receiving any benefits has increased, the proportion with no income apart from pension has fallen. Does this mean that sole parents are now more, or less, welfare dependent?

Claims that rising numbers of Australians in receipt of income support equate to a rise in welfare dependency have been challenged. Henman (2001b, p. 3) argues that such an interpretation represents an 'artefactual distortion' and that a significant portion of the rise can be simply explained by two factors: first, the widening in recent years of benefit categories, such as Parenting Allowance, to include low-income working families and, second, the splitting in 1995 of payments previously made to couples into separate payment categories (i.e. partners allowance and disability pension). That is, the splitting of family-based payments into separate male and female partner categories of payment will necessarily result in an increase in the absolute numbers of persons receiving welfare payments. These arguments are backed by Treasury figures that indicate that, despite the rhetoric of burgeoning and unsustainable cost increases, outlays for social security have been reasonably static in recent years (Treasury Budget Papers 1999).

It should also be stressed that only around half of current expenditure is used for groups targeted in welfare reform policies. Over a third of all social security outlay is spent on Age Pensions and a further 16 per cent in family payments, much of which is paid to working families. Of the remainder, unemployment allowances make up 16 per cent, disability and sickness payments another 14 per cent, with only around nine per cent expended on sole parents (Jamrozik 2001). Moreover, as shown in Table 3.2, the percentage of Commonwealth Budget expended on sole parents in the late 1990s is similar to that spent in the mid-1970s. In comparison, the percentage expended on Civilian Disability Pensions has nearly doubled during the same period (Manning 1998).

**Table 3.2: Social Security Programs as a Percentage of Commonwealth Budget Outlay 1975–1999**

	1975–76	1982–83	1987–88	1995–96	1998–99 (forecast)
Age Pension	10.0	12.1	11.4	11.6	11.8
War Disability Pension	1.6	1.3	1.4	1.3	1.3
Civilian Disability Pension	1.9	2.3	2.9	3.8	3.5
Sole Parents Pension	2.1	3.0	3.2	2.1	2.2
Benefits	2.8	5.4	5.2	4.3	5.3
Family Allowances	1.2	2.8	2.0	6.4	6.7

Source: Adapted from Manning 1998 (Commonwealth Budget Papers 1970–71 to 1995–96).

Thus, part of the problem of defining ‘welfare dependency’ may relate to the term being more an ideological tool than an empirical one (Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992). Not all those reliant on income support payments are deemed to be welfare dependent. Welfare dependency, as a label, is applied unevenly. Despite making up nearly half of all income support recipients, Age and Veteran Affairs pensioners are currently exempt from the application of the welfare dependent label. Conservative commentators, such as Sullivan (2000), explain this selective application by delineating ‘social security’ from ‘welfare’. Under this division, the Age Pension is social security earned by responsible citizens, whereas income support for sole mothers is welfare because it represents a ‘wholesale and conspicuous breach of the ‘earned right’ tradition of Australian social security’ (p. 183). Sole mothers, with the sole responsibility for raising a child, ‘have no earned right to support’ (p. 183). In what is starting to resemble a return to the nineteenth century categorising of the poor into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, moral definitions of ‘deservingness’ underpin to whom, and how, the concept of welfare dependency is applied in Australia.

### 3.4.2 Mutual Obligation

The notion of deservingness is also linked to a binary division between work and welfare. This model is encapsulated in the adoption of mutual obligation as a key plank of Australian welfare reform discourse. Based around the presumed obligation that all those who receive welfare support are expected to do something in return, the primary purpose of mutual obligation is to push individuals off dependency and into self-reliance (Saunders 2000). According to Yeatman (2000), the concept of mutual obligation can be traced to the paradox of paternalist contractualism described by

Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, whereby individuals have to be 'forced to be free'. The obligation in the context of welfare reform is, however, limited in definition and generally translates as market work effort. As leading American welfare reform proponent, and adviser to the Australian Government, Lawrence Mead, states, 'welfare reform mostly means work enforcement' (1999, p. 15). Under this rationale, the goal of social policy should be to overcome dependency by promoting equal citizenship based on participation in paid work (Murray 1982; Mead 1999). The linking of welfare payments to compulsory work requirements is seen as the only way to break the cycle of dependency and build self-reliance.

The identification of independence with market work is unquestioned in this discourse. In market terms, lack of self-reliance is perceived to be the result of personal inadequacies. Thus, welfare recipients, such as sole mothers, display labour market deficiencies in areas such as initiative, skills, motivation, entrepreneurial zeal, incentives and, particularly, work ethic (Yeatman 2000; Henman 2001b). For example, the 'Workless Families Assistance Pilot' program currently being trialled as part of the welfare reform initiatives has as its aim: 'to identify barriers that prevent workless families make the most of available opportunities' (FaCS 2000c). The program language leaves no doubt that these 'barriers' are individual, not social. Welfare dependency is defined as both the symptom and the cause, and reliance on income support is taken as evidence of individual incompetence. The behavioural, attitudinal and skill deficits of recalcitrant welfare recipients, therefore, need to be addressed via the stick of mutual obligation. For sole mothers, the extension of mutual obligation principles clearly allocates them to that class of welfare recipients that require behavioural change.

### **3.4.3 Language and the Changing Discourse**

In line with the changing discourse of welfare reform, the language of Australian social policy has also been altered. Policy documents now almost exclusively refer to 'welfare dependency' rather than 'social support', to 'welfare recipients' rather than 'social security clients', and the 'welfare safety net' rather than 'social security'. The Department of Social Security itself has been divided into policy and payment branches and these, technically separate, bodies renamed as the Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink. These changes represent much

more than mere semantics, instead underscoring the radical departure from the previous ideologies of the Australian welfare state. Such alteration in rhetoric and policy also provides a clear barometer of the discursive shift in public discourse from discussions of 'rights' to those of 'obligations' (Shaver 2000; Jamrozik 2001).

For sole mothers there have also been more concrete indicators of discourse change. Most fundamental of these is the 1998 replacement of the previous Sole Parent Pension with Parenting Payment (Single) as the main payment type for sole mothers. The ramifications of this alteration in benefit type are profound. Although this change is represented as stigma-reducing and providing support for people with child rearing responsibilities regardless of whether they are partnered or not (Newman 1997, cited in Shaver 2000), there are also less positive aspects. First, the Australian welfare system now contains no specific payment for sole parents. Rather, sole parents have been redefined as a sub-group of 'low income parents'. Second, by grouping all parents of dependent children together in the same category, the unique differences and difficulties of sole parents are obscured and recognition of the soleness of their parenting is removed. Third, the payment itself has moved away from the 'status' of a pension, and income support for sole parents is now aligned with temporary, employment-obligated payments such as Newstart.

This smudging of the soleness of sole parenting inherent in the change to parenting payment is exacerbated by the removal of the other explicit sole parent payments. Australia's social security system has traditionally recognised that sole parents face significant extra costs and compensated for these (in part at least) via the payment of Guardian Allowance (Whiteford 1991). However, this payment was abolished in July 2000 and its replacement, Family Tax Benefit Part B, while available to sole parents, is specifically targeted at single income couple families with dependent children (Family Assistance Office 2001). The rationale for the payment has, therefore, been drastically changed from a compensation for the extra costs of being a sole parent to a compensation to families with one primary income, regardless of the number of resident parents.

The most recent welfare reform policy initiative takes this path to its inevitable conclusion. Citing the need for the 'income support system for working-age people to ensure that it supports participation and self reliance, provides stronger incentives

of paid work and does more to tailor requirements and assistance to individual circumstances (Vanstone & Abbott 2002, p. 1), a recent Ministerial consultation paper signals the introduction of a single payment type for all 'welfare dependents'. Sole parents and those on disability payments are the major focus of this reform; age pensioners are specifically excluded.

### 3.5 Sole Mothers and the Discourse of Welfare Reform

Along with the imported concepts of 'welfare dependency' and 'mutual obligation', elements of the sole mother as 'social threat' discourse are also now emerging in Australia. Although not nearly as vitriolic as that seen in the United States or United Kingdom, the perceived moral and work ethic deficiencies of sole mothers and other groups not in the labour market are increasingly prominent in Australian welfare reform rhetoric. Comments by Employment Minister Tony Abbott, while not singling out sole mothers, famously suggested that responsibility for poverty could be allocated to the behaviour of poor people themselves. Citing individual behaviours such as drinking, gambling and substance abuse as 'choice', Abbott contends that poverty can be construed as an individual problem rather than a social one (*Advocate* 11 July 2001, p. 7). Elsewhere, Minister Abbott blames the welfare system for a negative effect on people's attitudes to work. Tackling unemployment, he argues, means making 'tough decisions and judgements about wages, the welfare system and human behaviour'. Such 'tough decisions' will result in making those currently reliant on welfare more 'job willing' (Abbott 2002, p. 13). The recently released Vanstone and Abbott welfare reform consultation paper (2002) also contains elements of this discourse. In arguing for a single payment for all working age income support recipients the paper: (a) points specifically to the low rate of employment of sole parents (p. 4); (b) claims that income support in Australia has become a transgenerational problem (p. 5); and (c) contends that the higher income at which sole parents lose entitlement, compared to Newstart Allowees, acts as a disincentive for sole parents to either reconcile or enter new relationships (p. 7).

Other commentators, such as the influential Centre for Independent Studies, are even more definite in propounding the 'sole mothers as a social threat' argument. Sullivan (2000), writing on Australian welfare reform, strongly endorses Murray's (1984) view that welfare payments in the United States were a key element in the creation of

an underclass of 'social and moral incompetents' (p. 177). Lamenting that welfare reform in Australia cannot be achieved by the simple rolling back of such obviously disastrous payments systems, as has happened in the United States, she writes:

'Welfare' here is a parasitic growth on a deeply rooted and fundamentally indigenous plant, and it is the unacknowledged recognition of this fact that has prevented any real espousal of the American treatment. Our only real immediately achievable option is to excise the growth, not uproot the plant (p. 178).

Within this argument, social support for sole parents is highlighted as particularly damaging, engendering among the young an expectation that the state will provide for the support of their children should they choose to 'renege on what we now realise is the only viable course for the raising of children in independence, namely the two parent family' (p. 204). Instead, she proposes that income support for sole mothers be treated as a loan that must be repaid by both parents when children reach independence or when income rises. Similar sentiments are expressed by Saunders (2001) in an opinion piece for the *Australian*. Government meddling in social policy over the last 30 years, Saunders argues, has seen gains to single parents at the cost of hugely increased taxes imposed on two parent families. The result of this is that 'married mothers who want to stay at home with their children have been forced out to work' (p. 11). Thus, sole motherhood not only directly undermines society but is also a direct threat to marriage in general and married mothers in particular. A recent book from the Centre of Independent Studies develops the theme further. Maley (2002) posits that the decline in the importance of marriage and the rise in the number of sole parent families is linked to a myriad of social problems in Australia. These include rising juvenile crime rates and youth suicide, declining fertility rates and low life chances for children. The absence of fathers, in particular, is claimed to be deleteriously impacting on boys' academic achievement. All of these arguments can be directly correlated with the sole mothers as 'social threat' discourse.

Conservative 'think tanks', however, are not the only points of reinforcement and disseminators of a 'social threat' discourse. Media portrayals have also been prominent in disaggregating a negative perspective of sole mothers. For example, economic commentator for the *Australian*, Robert Gottliebsen (2002), recently lambasted what he regarded as the work-shy mentality of housing estate residents. He blamed this phenomenon on the residents development of a social security lifestyle during the 1980s, noting that 'they learned that to maximise returns it is best



to have a number of children as a single parent' (April 3, p. 28). Similar comments are increasingly echoed in newspaper opinion pieces (see Botsam 2002). Media portrayals of sole mothers also often use the sensationalism of extreme examples to inform generalisations. A prime example of this practice is an article by the *Australian* columnist Angela Shanahan. Shanahan (2001), writing in defence of Abbott's comments on the self-contributing causes of poverty, offers this 'real life' comparison of a single and a married mother:

As two young mothers consider sparsely stocked shelves, one of them – quick as a flash – tears open a box of disposable nappies, changes the baby, dumps the dirty nappy and thrusts a couple more clean nappies behind junior's head. Then with the speed of Flo Jo she proceeds down the aisles cramming baby's quilt and even its little parka with a variety of goods from socks to cosmetics. At the frozen food section she loads the pram with frozen dinners which she pays for with food stamps. With great aplomb she waltzes past the somnolent checkout chick and into the arms of her waiting boyfriend. Thus provisioned they set off to find the local drug dealer for the rest of life's necessities for which hard cash is required.

Meanwhile the other mum has eked out the last of her cash on fresh food for her husband and two children. She cannot access food stamps or welfare... Despite the lack of food stamps, their children will not go hungry.

Shanahan does not explain the seemingly American origin of the story with its featured use of food stamps, but the inherent differences between the good, poor married mother and the bad, sole mother could not be plainer. In just this short excerpt the sole mother is positioned as brazenly dishonest (shoplifting), not a good mother (frozen dinners rather than home-cooked meals), promiscuous (boyfriend), and a substance abuser (drug dealer). In contrast, the married mother is portrayed as poor but honest (no theft despite poverty), self-sacrificing (eking out the last of her cash), and a good mother (fresh food for nutritious meals despite the extra work of preparation).

This acceptance and promotion of a social threat discourse is presented despite a lack of supporting empirical evidence, or applicability, to the Australian reality. For example, Shanahan's comparison infers that her prototype unmarried young mother is typical and this assumption is reflected in a general focus by the media and other commentators on teenage sole mothers. Yet, as noted previously, statistical data indicates that only around three per cent of Australian sole mothers are unmarried

teenagers and around three-quarters of sole mothers were previously married to the father of their children (FaCS 1998). It is telling, perhaps, that sole fathers, who at around 11 per cent of sole parents (ABS 2000a) represent a considerably larger identifiable group than teenage sole mothers are not subjected to the same sort of media scrutiny or pejorative discourse.

### **3.5.1 Public Perceptions and the Personal Experience Paradox**

The pervasiveness of negative discourse around sole mothering is exemplified by the disjunction between this discourse and personal experience. The rising proportion of sole parents in the population would seem to mitigate against compliant social acceptance of negative constructions of sole mothers. Very few Australians do not have either a friend or family member who has not been a sole parent at some stage. Indeed, as Silva (1996a) remarks, in the early 1990s all the grandchildren of Queen Elizabeth II were living in sole mother families! There seems to be a contradictory split between how we regard the sole mothers we know and the sole mother 'others' of popular conception. This disjunction is exemplified in British studies which find that sole mothers also ascribe to the deviant categorisation of sole mothers, but do not apply this label to themselves (Duncan & Edwards 1999; Rowlingson & McKay 1998). A notorious Australian example is Pauline Hanson's denunciation of sole parents as part of the One Nation platform. When reminded by the media that she, herself, raised her children as a sole parent, she countered with the argument that her particular circumstances were 'different' and therefore she was not one of 'those' sole parents (reference lost).

In line with the changing political discourse, Australian attitudes towards sole mothers have hardened. Public sentiment appears to reflect an acceptance of a 'social threat' perspective and sole mothers are viewed as among the least deserving of income support recipients. For example, a pre-election poll on social issues found that voters clearly saw sole parents' claims for social support as less legitimate than that by other groups. Around 33 per cent of those polled thought that government spending on sole parents was excessive, compared to only two per cent with a similar attitude to spending on age pensioners (*Age*, Monday 8 October 2001, p. 5).

### 3.6 Comparing Sole and Married Mothers' Work Activity

A central assumption in welfare reform discourse is that the workforce participation rate of sole parents is too low. Increasingly coercive work activity policies are also fuelled by the longstanding suspicion that income support leads to greater state reliance. Although such a contention is not supported by research evidence (see Ross & Saunders 1990; Whiteford 1997; Kalb 1998), the language of welfare reform, with its focus on 'welfare dependency' and 'mutual obligation' portrays sole mothers as exhibiting a lack of work ethic. But how do we judge that the employment rates of sole parents are inadequate? Policy arguments for increased sole parent work effort tend to centre on a negative comparison of the employment rates of sole and married mothers (Raymond 1987; Perry 1992; Newman 1999). The point being made is that, statistically, sole mothers do not engage in paid work at the same levels as married mothers. While ABS (2000a) figures show that similar proportions work full time (23 per cent compared to 26 per cent), far fewer sole mothers are in part-time work and more are unemployed. The higher employment levels of married women are used as the prime evidence in making the case that 'welfare dependence' among sole mothers is unacceptably high. For example, the Minister's welfare reform paper bases its rationale for changing sole parents' work obligations on the increasing employment of married mothers and the life course variation in parenting responsibilities (Newman 1999, p. 20). In policy determinations married mothers are a comparison group by which sole mothers' labour market performance is judged.

The notion that sole mothers' low employment rates result from individual choice is also central to the negative comparisons of sole and married mothers. As O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) point out, the prominent question in welfare reform debates is: 'Should sole mothers be allowed to continue to make the 'choice' not to participate in the labour market when more and more married mothers are 'choosing' to work' (p.150). Thus, the increasing proportion of women with dependent children in the labour force means that market work is increasingly characterised as something mothers 'choose' to do. By definition, therefore, not participating in the labour market is also a personal decision. From a social policy perspective, sole mothers are increasingly regarded as not making the 'right' choice, and the higher proportions of married mothers in employment highlight this lack of work ethic.

The rising social policy expectation that unpartnered mothers ‘must’ work to support their families is evident in the revision of the voluntary nature of the program assisting sole parents into the labour market, Jobs Education and Training (JET). A pilot of non-negotiable JET ‘active intervention assistance’ was conducted in 1999/2000, with the aim of ‘assisting parents to reduce their reliance on income support’ (Pearse 2000, p. 46). The initial assessment of this program, rather than presenting a picture of inert welfare dependency, found that levels of social and economic participation among sole mothers were already high. More than half of those mandated to attend a JET interview were already socially or economically active, participating in paid or voluntary work or education and training (Pearse 2000).

### **3.6.1 Mothers or Workers? Social Policy in Contradiction**

With the logic of the market now imposed on the welfare state, sole mothers are defined as employable and subject to the same type of work-enforcing policies as the unemployed. These labour market solutions, however, sit directly at odds with concurrent political rhetoric on the role of the family. This discourse, which places the family as ‘the most enduring system of social support’ (Liberal Party of Australia 1996), reflects little acknowledgement of the mutual interaction between status in, and of, the family and status in the labour market. Rather, with pressure to cut back welfare expenditure, an ‘unstated’ family policy within both the left and right of the Australian political sphere has been to progressively pass care and responsibility back to the family (McDonald 1993). This emphasis creates an obvious clash between the directions of family, social, economic and welfare reform policies. The ‘modern conservative’ foundation of current Federal Coalition policy proposes to support bedrock social institutions such as the family and promote enduring values such as personal responsibility, a fair go and the promotion of individual responsibility (Howard 2000, cited in Saunders 2000). Unacknowledged in this support, however, is the impact of major social and economic change. Rapid economic transformation, changes in the availability and nature of work, and altered attitudes towards gender roles and family formation norms, all influence the functioning of the family itself.

Thus, the political rhetoric and policy around welfare reform in Australia is characterised by the same contradictions found in other 'liberal' welfare regimes (Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992; Smart 1997; Bradshaw 1998; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999; Saunders 2000). Put simply, a clash of family and welfare reform discourse is the inevitable outcome of the simultaneous adoption of policies based on radical economic reform and social conservatism. While connected ideologically and in political rhetoric, such policies are incompatible in practice. For mothers, the result of this contradictory ideological pairing of neo-liberalist welfare and family policy is a contradiction on their preferred social role. The conservatism of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on family as the centre of care and nurture, is in direct conflict with its determination to reduce welfare dependency by pushing sole mothers into the labour market. On one hand, the need to reduce welfare dependency among sole mothers is demonstrated by negative comparisons of sole mothers' workforce activity with that of married mothers. On the other, political rhetoric and social policy encourages and financially supports the traditional family model of one parent in the labour market and one parent at home with children. From this emerge two contradictory and competing policy courses.

In Australia, this contradiction is most starkly evident in social policy initiatives introduced since the mid-1990s. Defining families as 'the fabric of society' and 'central to the ongoing stability of Australian society', the Howard Government has strongly endorsed a set of policies aimed at 'strengthening families' (Liberal Party of Australia 1996, p. 1). In actuality, such policies translate into support favouring the traditional, single income, two-parent family. Thus, the 1996 Family Tax Initiative boosted support for families relying on a single income and re-established tax deductions for dependent children. Although single parent, single income families are also eligible, these changes were specifically designed to give markedly higher benefits to couples qualifying on the basis of a single income (Castles 2000). For example, under the new Family Tax Benefit B, partnered parents can receive payment if the second family income is below \$10,416 per annum. The income of the primary earner is not taken into account (Family Assistance Office 2000). The 'baby bonus' of the 2001 election is also aimed at creating an incentive for mothers to leave the workforce. Under this policy, all parents of new babies will be eligible for a tax benefit for up to five years, with those staying at home entitled to a larger payment. The central principle is that a child's main carer can reclaim income tax

paid in their last full year of work before the birth, up to a maximum of \$2,500 per annum over a five year period (Marris 2001). Thus, those on higher incomes are entitled to a higher 'bonus', and those not working or on a low income before their child is born will get a minimum \$500 per annum. Demographer Peter McDonald (2001) claims that this payment, in combination with the Family Tax Benefit Part B, builds a system that discourages mothers from returning to work. Both Family Tax Benefit B and the 'baby bonus' are paid regardless of the income of the father. In contrast, Childcare Benefit is strictly income-tested against the income of both parents. For women who want to return to work part-time, the loss of these benefits plus the cost of childcare make it uneconomic to do so. Such policy, McDonald argues, aims for a return to the male breadwinner model of family.

Moreover, the disparity in rhetoric between these policies and those calling for greater work activity for sole mothers could not be clearer. While the labour market participation of married mothers is held up as an indicator of sole mothers' deficits as workers, it also, conversely, operates as an indicator of the primacy of motherhood in family discourse. The high level of part-time work by Australian married mothers is characterised as a 'choice' made to allow the fulfilment of their more important family obligations. For example, Colebatch (2002) quotes the ABS in saying that married women who are 'happy with their working hours' take most new part-time time jobs. Current family policy, in fact, encourages married women to put family obligations ahead of employment, such decisions seen as good for society, good for the family and, good for the women making them. British sociologist Catherine Hakim has been influential on this last item, with the Australian Prime Minister cited as being 'impressed' with her work (Maiden 2002). Married women, Hakim (2000) asserts, mostly reject the 'egalitarian idealism' of the same roles for husbands and wives, with the majority taking less demanding jobs than their partners so that they can concentrate on their child rearing. Instead, the vast majority of women in modern countries now have real choices 'between a life centred on private, family work and a life centred on market work or other activities in the public sphere (Hakim 2000, p. 2). As opposed to times past, these choices now arise equally for women from all social classes. As such, women's labour market choices should be seen as related to social agency, reflecting their actual preference on the mix of motherhood and labour market activity. Using this preference theory as her base, Hakim categorises women into three main types: work centred women who have no children or want to return to

work quickly; home centred women who regard child rearing as their most important job; and the majority of women, categorised as adaptive women, who try to balance the two roles by dipping in and out of the workforce. Thus, public policy which favours home centred women will expand this group to 'its maximum size, will persuade most adaptive women to give priority to family life over other activities, and will probably reduce the size of the work centred group to its smallest size' (p. 10). Using these types of rationales, McDonald (2000, cited in Maiden 2002) claims that the Howard Government is currently preparing an extension of policies that reward traditional families at the expense of dual income and single parent families. Indeed, Hakim's work, although offering an alternative theory to classic economic analyses of mothers' labour force participation patterns, does not consider the unique situation of sole mothers.

### **3.7 Mothers' Relationship to the Labour Market**

As shown in this and the previous chapter, a substantial body of Australian literature around sole parents' relationships with the labour market is already in existence. This literature informs the previous discussion. It also has limitations. For example, as detailed in Chapter Two, much Australian quantitative data, such as that from the ABS, tends to be descriptive and comparative. The focus is on rising sole parent numbers, statistical profiles of sole parent characteristics, and the contrasting patterns of labour market participation among sole and married mothers. The motivations and underlying rationale of sole mothers' labour market decisions, the impact of these on household economic well-being or how labour market activity fits into the larger context of raising children alone are only minimally explored, when at all. Moreover, the tendency to present sole mothers as a taxonomic category minimises the variable experience and transitional nature of sole motherhood. The smaller body of Australian qualitative research, also discussed in Chapter Two, such as that by Swinbourne et al. (2000), contains valuable contextual detail. However, these studies are also limited because they are not nationally representative and cannot be generalised to the Australian sole mother population.

Most important is the need to situate the statistical patterns, trends, and lived experiences of Australian sole mothers within the framework of concurrent economic, social and political change. As outlined in this chapter, the growing

influence of neo-liberalist discourse on the way Australian social policy is both framed and constructed has fundamentally altered the position of sole mothers in the Australian welfare state. In welfare reform rhetoric the high level of reliance of sole mothers on income support is cast as problematic and increased labour market activity as remedial. Yet, the same neo-liberalist framework is also linked to radical economic reform, restructuring of the labour market and changing patterns of family formation. The shifting discourse around sole mothers and its placement within the broader context of social and economic structural change is, therefore, integral to the analysis of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market. The inherent contradiction between a neo-liberal family policy that encourages mothers into the home and a welfare reform policy that enforces labour force activity encapsulates this changing discourse.

Further, in welfare reform debate, the assumption that the labour market activity of sole mothers needs to be raised is taken as a given. In the current policy environment, a mother's position appears essentially determined by her partnered status, with sole and partnered mothers dichotomised into separate systems of work, welfare and parenthood. This separation is rationalised by a negative discourse around sole motherhood, portraying sole mothers as active in creating their own disadvantage. The higher workforce participation rates of partnered mothers are used to validate claims of high welfare dependency among sole mothers. The underlying inference is that sole mothers are different to married mothers in their relationship to the labour market, with sole mothers assumed to be actively 'choosing' not to undertake labour market activity, preferring to remain reliant on state support. Thus, the overarching question that emerges from the literature and policy review included in this and the previous chapter asks:

*Does Australian sole mothers' relationship to the labour market differ to that of married mothers?*

The conceptual framework within which this question will be answered and the methods and techniques used in the analyses are developed and outlined in Chapters Four and Five.



## Chapter Four: Towards an Analytical Framework

### 4.0 Introduction

The process of answering this study's central question:

*Does Australia sole mothers' relationship with the labour market differ to that of married mothers?*

begins with its placement into an appropriate analytical framework. Constructed from the unique interaction of sole motherhood, welfare reform and labour market participation, this framework is construed from a micro- and a macro-perspective. While strongly linked, these two perspectives differ in key elements. The micro-perspective's focus is the direct relationship between Australian sole mothers and the labour market, and encompasses the practical, ideological and social context in which sole mothers make decisions about labour market participation. The macro-perspective takes a broader view, exploring the nexus of states, markets and sole mother families. This perspective emphasises the changing social and political discourse around sole mothers' connection to the labour market. Within this focus, the ideologies and impact of welfare reform on sole mother families forms a core element. Thus, the micro- and macro-perspectives, together, provide an analytical framework that incorporates the lived experience of the relationship between sole mothers and labour market participation, as well as the changing social policy milieu which frames and interprets this relationship.

This chapter outlines the individual theoretical strands that inform these two perspectives and develops the arguments for their inclusion in the analytical framework. In doing so, it also draws out the three key dimensions of the study's overarching question. These three dimensions are framed as three sub-questions and it is these sub-questions that form the basis of the study's substantive analyses in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

## 4.1 Micro-perspective

The micro-perspective contains two major elements which are developed from very different strands of social and economic theory. The first is Duncan and Edwards' (1999) concept of gendered moral rationalities. This theory provides the conceptual context in which sole mothers make decisions about labour market participation. The reconciliation of the competing values of 'good' motherhood and market worker, and the social context in which this negotiation takes place, determines what is 'rational choice' for mothers in relation to workforce activity. The second element of the micro-perspective is the concept of the income time/conundrum faced by sole mother households. Two theories, Becker's (1981) household production model and Vickery's (1977) model of time poverty, inform this concept. Both theories have as their focus the operational needs of households for inputs of both time and income. These two elements of the micro-perspective tap into different, but complementary, dimensions of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market. While Becker's and Vickery's theories portray child raising essentially in terms of unpaid work requirements, the concept of gendered moral rationalities extends these considerations to include the motivations of mothers in both caring for children and balancing the time and market work requirements needed to raise their children.

### 4.1.1 A Basic Economic Mistake?

At the base of the concepts of the income/time conundrum and gendered moral rationalities lies a critique of the neo-classical approach to labour supply theory. To provide a context, this section begins by developing this critique. The theoretical base of the two elements of the micro-perspective is then outlined in detail.

The re-casting of sole mothers as unemployed workers, inherent in welfare reform policy, centres on an econometric model of labour market determinations. Such policy assumes a neo-classical 'rational economic man' approach to labour supply theory whereby an individual determines their optimal labour supply based on maximising a utility function, or, more simply, maximises financial and personal gain (Folbre 1994; Donath 1995; Edwards & Duncan 1996; Seguino 1998). Under this economic perspective, individuals choose to supply, or not supply, labour, based on the perceived value of income derived from that labour compared to the value of

leisure. Applied to sole mothers, this approach predicts that levels of workforce activity will operate on a simple stimulus-response model, altering in magnitude and nature in response to economic or social policy. Thus, by an adjustment of policy to encourage participation and discourage non-participation, sole mothers' labour market participation can be increased and welfare dependence reduced.

While theoretically straightforward, this approach appears to have one glaring flaw. Its individualistic focus is inconsistent with any theory that includes parenting responsibilities. The social context of private activity and the economic context of decision-making in the private sphere is unconsidered (Folbre 1994; Seguino 1998). Essentially, such an approach ignores the fact that sole mothers are mothers. And, for all mothers, regardless of partnered status, children are interwoven into the life plan. Life choices are determined not only in economic terms but also in terms of motherhood. The 'welfare to work' type social policies of welfare reform are, therefore, premised on a basic 'economic mistake' (Duncan & Edwards 1999, p. 290).

The view that sole mothers (but not necessarily married mothers) can be regarded as rational economic men is exemplified in econometric research around sole parents. Individual characteristics such as age, qualifications, age of children, receipt of income support and pathway into sole motherhood are measured to predict, first, labour market participation rates and, second, appropriate social policy action to increase market activity levels. Typical findings of such research tend to focus on 'barriers' to labour market participation, such as low education and market skills, and to recommend social policy initiatives around training and education and/or additional childcare services (see Perry 1992; Frey 1986, Bradshaw et al. 1996; Ford 1998). Given this narrow focus, it is no wonder that some studies also come up with 'odd' findings that do not fit the economic model. Murray (1997, cited in Duncan & Edwards 1999) finds that Australian sole mothers are 'relatively unresponsive' to simulated changes in wage rates or benefit levels. Similarly, Bryson, Ford and White (1997) comment that working sole mothers appear willing to trade earnings for more hours at home with their children once they are able to command satisfactory weekly working income. This is not to argue that these studies are not valid, or that characteristics such as qualifications, age of children or economic considerations such as wage rates, childcare costs and benefits levels are not important factors in

sole mothers' labour market decisions. Rather, these factors need to be set within a framework of the ideologies, lived experiences and motivations of sole motherhood.

The real problem with the rational economic man model is its conception of what is 'rational choice'. The self-interest of an individual defined as 'essentially solitary, with needs and interests that are separate from, if not in opposition to, those of other individuals' (Jaggar 1988, cited in Donath 1995, p. 101) is incongruent with the self-sacrificing ideologies of motherhood. Parent/child relationships do not make sense in economic theory, and mothers' belief systems about the compatibility of motherhood and paid work can lead to very different constructions of the choices that can be made (Folbre 1994; Duncan & Edwards 1999). While economic theory may overcome this dissonance by classifying child rearing as a private sector activity motivated by duty and altruism rather than self-interest, this theoretical option is not open to sole mothers. Instead, they must practically and ideologically integrate the two. Thus, self-interest and rational choice are highly contextualised in their definition. If the concepts are widened to include the socially negotiated world in which sole mother families must live their lives, they become even more problematic.

Sole mothers, like all mothers, hold ideological understandings of their identity as a mother that are framed around the moral imperative of meeting their children's needs. The way in which these understandings are interpreted, negotiated and sustained, however, varies by social context. Some sole mothers give primacy to physically caring for their children and consider paid employment as incompatible with motherhood. Others consider paid work an option, but only if that participation is perceived as not adversely impacting on their primary caring role. Still others consider full-time work as providing the best financial and social environment for their family. Belief systems around an appropriate combination of motherhood and workforce activity, therefore, have strong but variable moral dimensions. The individual interpretation of these depends on the norms of the mothers' social milieu and the discourse surrounding mothering in general. Cultural understandings of 'good' mothering provide the context for sole mothers' paid work decisions.

## 4.2 Gendered Moral Rationalities

Duncan and Edwards (1999) term these various understandings ‘gendered moral rationalities’ (p. 119). Gendered moral rationalities are socially negotiated and vary amongst sole mothers. While all incorporate a strong sense of responsibility for children, perceptions surrounding the best way to meet this responsibility determine what a mother considers to be – for her – the appropriate relationship between motherhood and paid work. Duncan and Edwards (1999), from their qualitative analysis of British sole mothers’ perceptions, identify three main ‘ideal types of gendered moral rationalities’: primarily mother; mother/worker integral; and primarily worker. Each typology embodies a different orientation towards paid market work and motherhood.

### 4.2.1 Primarily Mother

The ‘primarily mother’ gendered moral rationality holds that the primary role of mothering – caring for children – is a full-time commitment. From this perspective, taking on paid employment when a mother still has dependent children is not morally right and is inconsistent with being a ‘good mother’. Duncan and Edwards (1999) note that sole mothers fitting this ideal type tend to use moral arguments such as: ‘If you have children you should be with them and not leave them with someone else’ or ‘If you work you miss out on your children growing up’ (p. 120).

### 4.2.2 Mother/Worker Integral

In the ‘mother/worker integral’ form, employment for sole mothers is considered a valid choice because the extra finances can help mothers to meet the needs of their children. Working is therefore defined as morally right in terms of how it can assist in the primary role of a ‘good mother’. Mothers within this ideal type are noted as often making statements such as: ‘You need to earn money to take care of your children’ or ‘Working sets a good example for my children so that they’ll want to get on in life themselves’ (Duncan & Edwards 1999 p. 120).

### **4.2.3 Primarily Worker**

Under the 'primarily mother' gendered moral rationalities type, employment is seen as positive, but its benefits are defined in terms of mothers' identities as workers rather than as an adjunct to good mothering. Sole mothers fitting this type say things like: 'Working gives me status and self-respect' or 'I wouldn't be able to cope with just staying at home with the children all day' (p. 120).

This three-way division, Duncan and Edwards (1999) argue, expands on the mother/worker dichotomy of standard policy discussion. This policy-oriented, dual conceptualisation is seen as too narrow in that it conceives the mother or worker identity as essentially separate, with little understanding that, for many sole mothers, the mix of identities is complex and shifting. Therefore, these typologies are essentially second order constructs because they capture key features of gendered moral rationalities but do not necessarily represent individual cases. In reality, sole mothers may, and do, hold any combination of these three belief systems, even when the resulting orientation contains internal contradictions.

In their construction, these three typologies have strong similarities to those identified under Hakim's (2002) preference theory. As outlined in the previous chapter, Hakim categorises women into three main types: work-centred women who have no children or want to return to work quickly; home-centred women who regard child rearing as their most important job and tend to stay out of the labour market; and the majority of women, categorised as adaptive women, who try to balance the two roles by dipping in and out of the workforce. However, there are some essential differences. First, Duncan and Edwards' (1999) model is framed around sole mothers, in particular, rather than mothers in general. Second, while Hakim (2000) casts mothers' labour market decisions as being the result of social agency and natural preferences, Duncan and Edwards (1999) see the different motherhood orientations as informed by the social circumstances of the mother, as well as by the cultural discourse of good mothering dominant in different social milieu.

### **4.2.4 Social Patterning Of Gendered Moral Rationalities**

In Duncan and Edwards' (1999) analysis, these three typologies were not randomly distributed, but class linked. Using levels of human capital, such as education, as a

proxy for social class, working class mothers, especially those living in housing estates, tended to fit the 'primarily mother' category, prioritising care for their children over and above paid work. Middle class sole mothers tended towards the 'mother/worker' integral typology that gives primacy to a mother's caring role but also values the independence, status and self esteem that paid employment can bring. Differences between these two groups, however, were overshadowed by their shared views on the basic incompatibility between paid work and mothering. In contrast, a minority group of better educated sole mothers, often home owners and living in better quality 'gentrifying' neighbourhoods were far more likely to hold primarily worker or mother/worker integral value systems. Thus, Duncan and Edwards (1999) conclude that social structural features such as ethnicity, social class and conventionality are more important in predicting patternings of gendered moral rationalities than are actual work opportunities.

#### **4.2.5 The Australian Context**

Although based on a British model, these typologies have resonance in the Australian context. Differing gendered moral rationalities make sense when juxtaposed with qualitative evidence on sole mothers' attitudes toward the compatibility of paid work and mothering. For example, Swinbourne et al. (2000), in an Australia-wide focus group study, identified a risk/trust nexus that informs the decision-making of sole parents on workforce re-entry. Those who perceive higher risks, such as those with less education, lower earning capacity and younger children, are more likely to judge the cost of labour market activity to their family as too high. The risk to a stable family life of combining paid work and sole parenting was identified as a major disincentive to workforce participation. Others such as Cowling (1998) find that for many sole mothers paid work is judged as 'not worth it' (p. 26). The concept of 'worth' in this context, is, however, non-monetary and focuses on the care and attention that children miss when their resident parent is employed. In this focus group study of relatively unskilled participants, caring obligations were clearly seen as incompatible with involvement in the workforce and most reported giving up jobs because of the clash of roles. Morehead (2002), using Duncan and Edwards' mother typologies to inform her focus group study of seven Australian sole mothers, finds that mothers' labour market activity decisions are not determined solely by financial

rationales but, rather, 'are the result of a sometimes personally uncomfortable combination of parenting values and aspirations for paid work (p. 61).

### **4.3 The Income/Time Conundrum**

The neo-classical economic approach to labour supply also contains a more practical flaw in its applicability to the labour market decisions of sole mothers. Its portrayal of an individual determining optimal labour supply based on maximising a utility function assumes, first, that the individual has no obligations other than market work and, second, that time not spent in employment may be used as leisure. Unpaid work requirements, such as the household and parenting work built into motherhood, do not feature in the analysis.

#### **4.3.1 The Household Production Model**

Becker's (1981) household production model addresses the anomaly of the place of unpaid work. The household production model extends economic theory from the public sphere into the private sphere of the family. Traditional economics analysis, Becker contends, concentrates on the use of income alone to maximise the utility function of the household for goods and services. A more realistic version recognises that families require a time input as well as money income. Under household production theory, child functioning and development is viewed as a commodity desired by the family and achieved by inputs of both time and money from the parents. Children, say Becker, are 'self produced by each family, using market goods and services and the time of parents, especially mothers' (1981, p. 96). Thus, money income in a household is not a 'given' but is determined by the time allocated by the household to market work. Conversely, the household's time budget is determined by the time allocated to unpaid household activity at the expense of time that could be theoretically used to produce market income. When parents undertake market work, they lose time with children but theoretically gain income. If they substitute unpaid work time for employment time they gain time with children but presumably have less income. An appropriate balance in the inputs of time and income achieves household utility.



Becker's household production model has, of course, been comprehensively and rightly criticised (see Donath 1995; Folbre 1994). Although the theory provides a theoretical basis for making unpaid household work visible, it also contains major deficits. For example, intra household exchange is ignored and the standard economic assumption of the single household utility function is retained. Additionally, the gendered nature of the division of labour is upheld on the basis of an earnings function. Becker argues that as women generally earn less than men it makes sense for the unpaid caring role in the household to be largely undertaken by mothers. However, the wider issue of why women's earning functions are lower than men's is not addressed. It is also important to realise that Becker's theory emerged from the Chicago School of Economics, noted for its passionate defence of free markets. In fact, an aim of the household production model was to demonstrate that markets operate efficiently in all spheres of life and thus provide a rationale for limiting government intervention in the social or domestic sphere (Donath 1995).

An obvious example of the narrow framework of Becker's model is the omission of any consideration of sole parent households. Becker only considered household situations where two parents (or more) are available to contribute to the family time and money budget. That he chose to apply his model to polygamous marriage households but not to the far more common (and legal) sole parent households is an interesting point in itself. Duncan and Edwards (1999) argue that presumably sole mothers are omitted from Becker's economic analysis because they do not have a male partner and are, therefore, unable to trade domestic work for male market income. As they do not fit the model, they simply 'disappear' from the analysis. However, despite the validity of the criticism, the basic thesis of Becker's household production model – that households with dependent children require the input of time and money for utility – remains highly salient. The household production model, therefore, is valuable in that it provides insights to the underlying decision-making processes relating to choices about market work and unpaid work and reflects the interdependence of time allocation decisions in households.

#### **4.3.2 Time Poverty**

The basic insights in Becker's model are developed in Vickery's (1977) concept of time poverty. Vickery argues that in evaluating the material well-being of a

household, both time and money, as a two-dimensional index of well-being, need to be considered. Because some things essential to well-being, such as parenting, can only be produced with time, quantification of household resources must include non-market production as well as earned income and assets. Therefore, not only can households be poor from a lack of market income, they may also be 'poor because of a deficiency of non-market time' (p. 28). Vickery's analysis specifies the number of hours available to each adult for paid and unpaid work as a maximum of 87 hours per week, with the unpaid time input needed for one child calculated at around 60 hours per week. Child input hours rise slightly for two or more children in each household type, but unpaid work is seen as having economies of scale and a single child is rated as consuming nearly as much time as two or more children. In two adult households, the hours required in market work and household time can be shared, but single parents must buy off home time in order to work in the market. Hence, the replacement cost of non-market work for sole parents is much higher than in two-parent families. The result, Vickery concludes, is that many poor households, especially those with only one parent, are fundamentally unable to 'work themselves out of poverty' (1977, pp, 34, 41). Further, as home production and income are both necessary for family well-being, any income support program that correct for money differences but not for time differences across households, will discriminate against households with only one adult. Thus, in Vickery's model, the interaction between the dual need for paid and unpaid work varies by household type.

This simultaneous need of households for both time and income, identified by Vickery and Becker, can be termed the income/time conundrum. While all mothers face the difficulties inherent in balancing parenting, home and market work obligations, for sole mothers the task is even more fraught with difficulty. Although paid employment may have a positive financial impact, it also requires sole mothers to alter the focus of their time and efforts away from their children towards earning a wage. A direct trade-off in time costs to parenting and household work must therefore be made, with the gains and losses of market work weighed up against the gains and losses to parenting and household time. For a mother with sole child-rearing responsibilities, making a balanced choice may be impossible. Sole mother families may irreconcilably need both more time and more income for family well-being. Whiteford (1991), for instance, concludes that sole parent families have increased income requirements to compensate for the time inputs 'lost' through the

absence of the second adult. Yet from Becker's household production model, or Vickery's concept of a dual index of time and income, it is not possible for sole mothers to simultaneously increase the amount of time spent in garnering market income *and* the time spent in family work, in order to replace the time inputs of the other parent. Thus, while all households face a trade-off, the income/time conundrum is more difficult in households where only one parent must contribute the majority of both time and income.

## **4.4 Macro-Perspective**

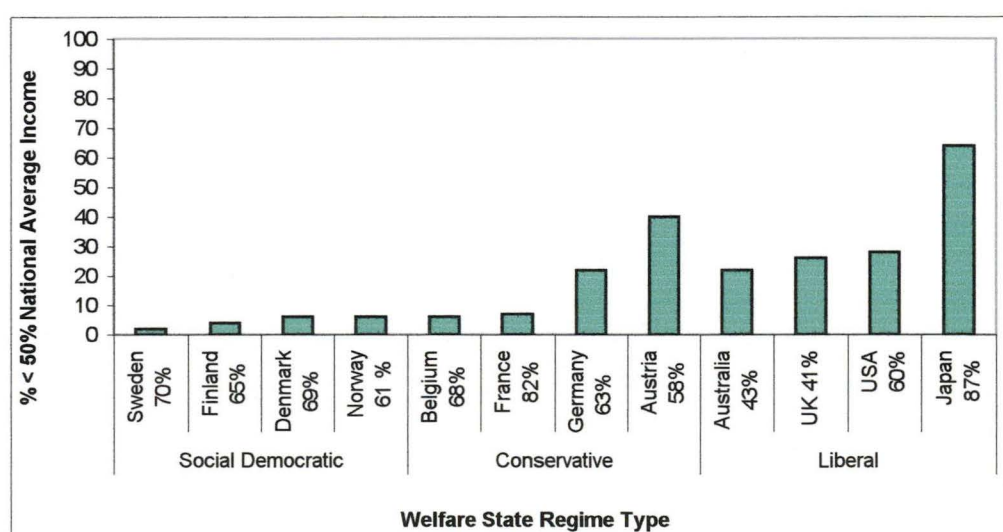
The conceptual framework for the macro perspective is the nexus of states, markets and families within the context of welfare reform. The analytical structure of the macro-perspective uses Duncan and Edwards' (1999) genderfare model as its theoretical foundation. Based on Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare state typology, the genderfare theory develops the theoretical frame further to include gender, mothering and partnered status. The following section begins by detailing how Esping-Andersen's typology identifies the connection between welfare state regime type, employment and poverty rates of sole mothers. The applicability of Duncan and Edwards' (1999) enhanced model to this thesis' core question is then outlined.

### **4.4.1 Sole Mothers, Labour Market Activity and The Welfare State**

As outlined in Chapter One of this thesis, Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of welfare state types is based on different political and ideological views of society. Consequently the various welfare state types that he identifies – 'liberal', 'conservative' and 'social democratic' – vary in their social and political conceptions of the appropriate relations between individuals, the state, families and markets. Social policy associated with different welfare state types reflects these views in terms of definitions of what is and what is not regarded as work, the type and amount of provision of social services that allow women to participate in the labour market and, in turn, the likelihood of an individual entering or exiting the labour market (Mitchell 1993). Esping-Andersen's typology, therefore, has strong relevance for the analysis of sole mothers' relationship to the labour market.

Welfare state regimes also influence the level of household material well-being associated with sole mothers' labour market participation. While cross-national differences in sole mother employment levels and poverty have long been noted (see (Bradshaw et al. 1996; Whiteford 1997; Christopher et al. 2001), using Esping-Andersen's typology it is clear that this variation is not random but strongly aligned to the different categories of welfare state regimes. For example, Mitchell (1993), analysing Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) data, demonstrates that the link for sole mothers between poverty and market work varies by welfare state regime. Using regression analysis, Mitchell finds that if Australian 'liberal' regime sole mothers lived under the Swedish 'social democratic' type regime, then many more would be employed and poverty rates would fall. Alternatively, if they lived under an American style 'liberal' system, then although employment levels might still be high, poverty rates would also rise substantially. Similarly, McLanahan, Casper and Sorensen (1992) find poverty rates for working and non-working sole mothers significantly higher in 'liberal' welfare states than in other welfare regimes types. Predicted poverty rates for Australia and the United States were nearly five times that of Sweden for non-working sole mothers and seven times higher for working sole mothers. Reproduced in Figure 4.1 below, Duncan and Edwards (1999) demonstrate the wide welfare regime variation in the poverty rates of working sole mothers. The rates of sole mother labour market participation in each country is included as a percentage with country name in this figure.

**Figure 4.1: Cross-national Poverty Rates of Working Sole Mothers**



Source: Adapted from Duncan & Edwards 1999. Original source Bradshaw et al. 1996 and Duncan & Edwards 1997.

Using a poverty rate set at less than 50 per cent of the average national income, the 'social democratic' group of countries exhibit high rates of sole mother labour market participation and very low rates of poverty among working sole mothers. By comparison, sole mothers from countries characterised as having 'conservative' welfare regimes, while recording relatively high rates of sole mother employment, also record higher poverty rates. The most obvious contrast, however, is between the 'social democratic' countries and the 'liberal' welfare regimes. Here, labour market participation among sole mothers is low, but the poverty rate of working sole mothers is high. For example, while less than half of Australian sole mothers are in the labour market, more than 20 per cent of these employed sole mothers still have incomes below half the national average.

#### **4.4.2 Gender Blindness and the Gender Contract**

Applying Esping-Andersen's model directly to sole mothers is, however, problematic. The analysis disregards the impact of unpaid domestic and caring work in mediating individuals' levels of commodification, and excludes women outside the labour market from its analysis (Duncan & Edwards 1999). Policies of decommodification are gendered in both their uses and effects, with Hobson (1994, p. 171) arguing that because sole mothers are particularly affected by interactions of social policy and the labour market, they can be taken as the 'litmus test' of gendered social rights in different welfare regimes. As such, Esping-Andersen's model, especially in relation to de-commodification, has been widely criticised as neglecting differing gendered realities and thus being highly gendered in its gender blindness (Hobson 1994). Various solutions have been proposed to address this limitation. Alternative models, utilising the strengths of Esping-Andersen's basic model, but adding to the analysis gendered concepts such as non-market caring work (Lewis 1992), family engagement indicators and an individual's capability for accessing a reasonable standard of living independent of the traditional family (McLaughlin & Glendinning 1994 p. 65, cited in Duncan & Edwards 1999), or the compensatory policies of caring in a welfare state regimes (Hobson 1994) have all been developed.

Yet, while these alternative models address the gender weakness of Esping-Andersen's categorisation, they still do not explain why sole mothers' employment and poverty levels vary so significantly by welfare state regime. Why are 'social

democratic' sole mothers likely to have high levels of both employment and material well-being, whereas the opposite is true for 'liberal' sole mothers? Again, various explanations have been proposed. The OECD (1993), for example, points to social policies that support mothers' employment as the explanation – that is, structure of the labour market, availability of employment, women's education and training options, and childcare availability and affordability. In this rationale, countries that have socially supported employment for all mothers are also likely to have high employment rates for sole mothers and consequent reductions in poverty. This reasoning, however, leaves unexplained the variable disparity of sole and married mothers' employment rates across different countries, as outlined earlier in Chapter Two (Figure 2.4). In some countries, proportionately fewer sole mothers than married mothers are employed, yet in others, the employment rate of sole mothers is significantly higher. Millar (1996) builds on the OECD's explanation, arguing that while social support for mothers' employment is important, it is the overall policy regime and in particular the ease with which women can be both mothers and workers which influences the take-up rate of employment by sole mothers. Categorising labour market participation patterns into three groups, she finds that in the first group, countries with public childcare services, universal family benefits and female employment rights, such as the Scandinavian countries, have high female employment regardless of partnered status. In the second group, which includes Australia, the general lack of caring and employment support leads to low female employment rates for all women with dependent children. The third group, while having low support for mothers' employment, pairs this with very low levels of social assistance for those without jobs or a husband for financial support. Thus in countries such as the United States, sole mothers are pushed into employment by the lack of any alternative means of support.

#### **4.5 The 'Genderfare' Model**

Duncan and Edwards (1999) agree with Millar's analysis and argument, but contend that the dimension of work mode, that is, hours of market work, also needs inclusion. The way the state supports, or does not support, women's unpaid caring work is also reflected in the type and pattern of work that sole and married mothers are likely to access. A closer examination of the comparatively low rates of employment for both married and sole mothers in 'liberal' welfare regime countries, they argue, reveals a

marked disparity in rates of part-time work. Married mothers have significantly higher rates of part-time work than do sole mothers in most 'liberal' welfare regime countries. This divergence is typically attributed to the partnered status of married mothers, which operates to provide greater access to informal, often family-based, childcare arrangements. In line with their domestic responsibilities, however, the part-time employment of married mothers in these countries tends to be 'short part-time' of less than 20 hours per week, often at relatively low wage rates and with low job security. The soleness of sole mothers' parenting often means they are unable to take these positions and, even where they do, the wages paid often do not compensate for the extra costs involved in entering the labour market. This explanation appears to provide a very good fit to the current pattern of sole and married labour market participation in Australia (see Table 2.5 in Chapter Two). The exception to this rule is the United States, which, although categorised as a 'liberal' welfare regime, records high full-time employment rates for sole and married mothers. Duncan and Edwards (1999), like Millar (1996), explain this anomaly by referring to the low quality of many jobs and the weak state of the American welfare system.

Duncan and Edwards (1999) point to the gendered division of labour, in both the private and public sphere, as explanation for these distinctive patterns. They cite Hirdmann (1988; 1990) in arguing that each nation has a pre-established gender system that arranges people according to two overall rules. These are, first, that virtually all areas of life are divided into male and female categories and, second, that this distinction is hierarchical, with the male experience the norm and the female experience given the lower value. This gender system is operationalised by a 'gender contract' which ascribes the appropriate roles, behaviours and life options for each gender. In turn, different gender contracts tend to be associated with different welfare regimes. However, it is not the state that determines the nature of the gender contract but, rather, that different welfare state regimes reflect pre-existing gender cultures. Duncan and Edwards (1999, p. 228) categorise gender contracts in developed nations into four main types: traditional, housewife, dual, and equality contracts.

In this theory, welfare states regimes reflect variations in both the capital labour contract, as demonstrated by Esping-Andersen's model, and a nation's traditional gender contract. These contracts interact. For example, Germany's 'housewife'

gender contract effectively removes most women’s labour from the market and necessitates the use of ‘guest’ labourers. In contrast, the ‘equality’ gender contract in Sweden affects labour strategies implemented by employers and unions, and works to facilitate women’s strong position in the labour market. Thus, the position of women with caring responsibilities in a welfare state is an outcome of these two contacts. Duncan and Edwards dub this model, outlined in Table 4.1 below, as ‘genderfare’.

**Table 4.1: Genderfare in Developed Countries**

<b>Gender Contract</b>	<b>Welfare State Regime</b>		
	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Social Democratic</i>
<i>Traditional</i>	Ireland	Japan	
		Switzerland	
<i>Housewife</i>	Australia New Zealand United Kingdom USA	Germany Austria Belgium	
		Netherlands	
<i>Dual</i>		France	
		Norway	
<i>Equality</i>			Denmark Sweden Finland

Source: Adapted from Duncan & Edwards 1999

Under this model, Australia and other English speaking countries fall clearly into the ‘housewife’ gender contract/‘liberal’ welfare regime category. Scandinavian countries are characterised as having an ‘equality’ gender contract/‘social democratic’ combination, while countries like France are placed within the ‘dual’ gender contract/‘conservative’ welfare regime category. Several countries, such as Norway, are perceived as falling between distinct categories.

#### **4.5.1 The Genderfare Model in the Australian Context**

Developed in the mid-1990s, Australia’s placement in the genderfare model seems even more apt in the ‘welfare reformed’ Australian welfare state of the early 2000s. Current welfare reform discourse, with its reinforcement of the primacy of the market while simultaneously supporting a gendered system that defines caring and parenting work as private, fits well within the model’s liberal/housewife contract prediction. Under welfare reform, sole mother policy solutions are framed in terms of moving those reliant on income support out of welfare dependency and into self-



reliance through participation in the labour market. However, in line with the liberal welfare regime aspect of the genderfare model, dependency is defined narrowly as dependence on income support rather than dependency on the income of male partners. Thus, the push for maternal employment applies only to sole mothers. Yet, from the housewife contract dimension of the genderfare model, the parenting work of sole motherhood remains a private matter.

Thus, the genderfare model provides a useful analytical framework for examining the relationship between Australian sole and married mothers and the labour market participation from two different dimensions. First, the 'genderfare' model operates to underline the emerging distinction in neo-liberalist ideology in terms of the way the state interacts with different family forms. Within this structure, sole mothers are increasingly relocated in social policy terms from the private to the public sphere. Recast as individual citizens with consequent obligations to labour market participation, sole mothers' parenting work is ignored or defined as just another labour market barrier. This re-categorisation is not extended to married mothers, and an ideological distinction between the two groups is established. Second, the presumption inherent in sole parent social policy of higher workforce participation as the most enduring way out of poverty for single parent families is questioned by the model. While policy efforts have focused on reducing barriers to work, promoting work, and now, under welfare reform, enforcing participation, questions about the efficacy of such activity do not appear to have been asked, let alone answered.

The link between participation rate, level of material well-being, welfare regime type and the state's support for caring work is also unexplored. The commodification of sole mothers' labour and the emphasis on the relationship between paid work and welfare ignores the more important interaction between paid work, unpaid work and welfare. Rates and modes of sole mother employment and, crucially, consequent levels of material well-being are strongly influenced by the interface of a society's welfare regime and gender contract. Australia's position within the liberal welfare regime/housewife gender contract classification, therefore, has a fundamental impact on sole mothers' capability to be both a mother and a worker. Thus, the genderfare model provides a broader macro-perspective framework in which to place the micro-perspective aspects of the income/time conundrum and gendered moral rationalities.

## 4.6 Analysing the Research Question

These different, but interlinking, theoretical strands provide the analytical structure to answer this study's main research question – that is: *Does the nature of Australian sole mothers' relationship to the labour market differ to that of married mothers?* Moreover, the development of the micro- and macro-perspectives of this framework reveals that sole mothers' relationship with the labour market contains within it a number of associated, but separate, dimensions. First, for mothers, labour market determinations are not made on purely economic grounds. Rather, such decisions must be negotiated within the social and personal contexts of competing ideological values around motherhood and market work. All mothers hold beliefs regarding the appropriateness of combining market work with mothering responsibilities, but the interpretation of the comparability of these two roles is likely to vary according to social group. Moreover, in Australian social policy, being at home for children – the wish of many Australian mothers' is to provide such care over labour market considerations – is valorised for married mothers. Under welfare reform, the same official encouragement and sanction is not extended to sole mothers. The question therefore arises: is there a difference in the way that sole mothers and married mothers view the compatibility of their motherhood role with that of labour market activity?

The second dimension of this study's main research question concerns the practical difficulties of reconciling market work and parenting. Despite the emphasis on caring and nurturing in current family discourse, the obligations of sole mothers to parent their children do not make a strong appearance in Australian welfare reform debates. The need for both time and income for effective family functioning is especially muted. Rather, the emphasis is on differences in labour market participation between the sole and married mothers and the justification this disparity provides for enforcing labour market activity under mutual obligation. Therefore, the question in this dimension pertains to whether a difference in rates of labour market participation also indicates a difference in attitudes towards paid work by sole mothers to that of married mothers?

The third dimension of the main research question concerns financial considerations. Despite the framing of increased labour market participation as the appropriate social

policy response to sole parenthood, the efficacy of market work for sole mothers remains unexamined. Will increased labour market participation by sole mothers significantly enhance the material well-being of sole mother households? Moreover, what is the influence of labour market participation on the level of material well-being in comparison to other characteristics and circumstances, such as partnered status, of sole and married mother households? For the purposes of analysis, the three dimensions described above are translated into three sub-questions, each encapsulating a major element of the study's overarching question. These sub-questions are:

1. *Are sole mothers' perspectives on the compatibility of motherhood and labour market participation different to those of married mothers?*
2. *Do the different levels of labour market activity by sole and married mothers represent a difference in orientation towards labour market participation?*
3. *What is the comparative impact of mothers' occupational and partnered status on their household's level of material well-being?*

These three sub-questions, the ideological, practical and financial aspects of the study's overarching question, form the basis of my analysis. The specific discussion and literature review of each are, for contextual continuity, developed in association with the relevant data analyses. The theoretical development, analysis and results of sub-question 1 are presented in Chapter Six; sub-question 2 is explored in Chapter Seven; and Chapter Eight examines sub-question 3. In Chapter Nine, the major elements of these analyses are brought together to answer the over-arching question that motivates this thesis.

## Chapter Five: Data and Methods

### 5.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the data and methods used to analyse the three sub-questions developed from the ideological, practical and financial dimensions of sole and married mothers' relationship to the labour market. The initial results from the bivariate comparative analysis of the sole and married mother respondents across a range of demographic, social and personal characteristics are also detailed. These preliminary analyses, while providing informative, substantive data, do not aim to provide a definitive statistical profile. Rather, their twin purpose is, first, to provide an overview of the sole and married mother respondent groups to inform the later analyses, and, second, to broadly compare the database of this study with the findings from other related research.

### 5.1 Data

In order to investigate the three sub-questions, the three analyses compare patterns of labour market participation, rationales, attitudes and values towards market activity and motherhood, and the efficacy of paid work on household material well-being among sole and married mothers. These analyses use data from the first wave of the Negotiating the Lifecourse Survey (NLC). The NLC is a project of the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University and the University of Queensland. This indefinite life panel survey of Australian family members examines the ways Australians negotiate the pathways through work and family. The data were collected by a national random telephone survey using the electronic white pages as its sample frame. Only one person per selected household is interviewed, with this person randomly selected from all 18–54 year olds in the household on the basis of having the most recent birthday. The data from the first wave of the NLC comprise phone interviews with 2,231 persons collected in two rounds, the first in October/November 1996 and the second in February/April 1997. The data were

collected using the Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system and the Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne conducted the interviews. The estimated response rate was relatively high by current standards, varying between 52 and 63 per cent, depending on how the rate is calculated. Sydney and Melbourne had lower response rates, possibly because of language difficulties (McDonald et al. 2000).

### **5.1.1 Representativeness of the Data**

Comparative analyses of the NLC data with those from the ABS indicate that the NLC is broadly representative of the Australian population. However, while the NLC has a similar distribution to the total Australian population across states and territories, its sample is biased towards women, and divorced women in particular. For this research, such over-representedness is a bonus. There is also a slight bias towards people in older age groups. Those aged under 25 years, and young males especially, are under-represented. People born in non-English speaking countries are also under-represented. In the area of labour force activity, the NLC data correspond with those from the ABS, although the respondents in the NLC sample, especially women, are slightly more likely to be in the labour force. As only one respondent was interviewed from each household, the partner's labour force status and income details were collected by proxy from the interview partner. A comparison of male and female responses suggested that proxy reporting by the respondent of their partner's labour force status and income was accurate. However, the use of income ranges, rather than precise figures, for partner income means that this variable is less complete than the respondent's own income variable (McDonald et al. 2000).

### **5.1.2 The Advantages of the NLC Data**

The use of the NLC dataset for this research has some distinct advantages over other family databases. First, the NLC project was specifically designed to study links between paid and unpaid work over the lifecourse. Therefore, not only are the data current, but the NLC provides rich detail on respondents' backgrounds, family sources of income, employment histories and childcare arrangements. Additionally, the NLC provides detailed attitudinal data related to respondents' satisfaction with work, household and parenting work, self-esteem, future aspirations and other measures of personal and social well-being. The aims of the NLC project, which

include: (a) identifying aspects of the family-household system and the labour market that facilitate or impede women's involvement with the labour market (b) an investigation of the interrelationships between labour force decisions about family formation and household arrangements and (c) an assessment of the policy implications of the findings of the project for the institutions of the welfare state, the labour market and the family, are also consistent with those of this research.

## 5.2 Definition of the Sample

For this thesis the NLC dataset has been restricted to those respondents who are either a married mother or a sole mother and have a dependent child, or children, resident with them in their household. Mothers, married or sole, whose children are not currently residing with them, are excluded from the analyses. The specific definitions are detailed below.

The ABS (1997a) defines a dependent child as:

All persons under 15 years and persons aged 15–24 years who are full-time students, living with a parent, guardian or other relative and do not have a spouse or offspring of their own living with them (p. 48).

However, as the NLC dataset does not include data on the educational status of children, it is not possible to delineate between those children aged 16 or over who are studying, and those who are not. Also, given that over 70 per cent of young people now continue their schooling to grade 12, when they are around 18 years of age (ABS 2002b), it does not appear reasonable to limit the definition of a dependent child to those aged under 15 years. Therefore, in the current study, all children living in the home of their parent/s and aged less than 18 years are considered to be dependent. For this study, therefore, the definition of a dependent child is:

*All persons aged under 18 years living with a female parent who do not have a spouse or offspring of their own living with them*

In line with the ABS definition, the term 'sole mother' used in this analysis refers to those mothers who belong to a family that consists only of themselves and one or more of their dependent children (ABS 1998a), as described above. In the current study, a sole mother is further defined as:

*A woman with a dependent child/children aged less than 18 years, who is not currently residing in a cohabiting relationship with a male partner. This definition includes those who are separated, divorced or widowed from a de jure marriage and those who have never married.*

Within some sections of the analysis, the sole mother respondents are further categorised into those who were previously in a registered marriage and those who have never been in a registered marriage. Under this definition:

- (a) A previously-married sole mother is a mother whose current circumstances fit the above definition of a sole mother and who has previously resided in a registered de jure marriage.*
- (b) A never-married sole mother is a mother whose current circumstances fit the above definition of a sole mother, but who has not previously resided in a registered de jure marriage.*

To maintain a clear distinction between the partnered and unpartnered status of the two mother groups, only those mothers of a dependent child or children who are currently in a registered de jure marriage with the father of those children are included in the sample. Mothers of dependent children who are living in a de facto relationship, or who are in a registered de jure marriage with a man other than the father of their children, are excluded from the analysis. Therefore, for the current study, a married mother is defined as:

*A woman with a dependent child or children aged less than 18, who is living with, and in a registered de jure marriage with, the father of her children.*

The final sample consisted of 585 cases: 441 married mothers and 144 sole mothers, a ratio of 75/25<sup>1</sup>. As shown in Table 5.1, the pattern of the sole mother respondents' pathways into sole motherhood is similar to that reported in other data (FaCS 1998) (McHugh & Millar 1996). Over 70 per cent of the sole mothers are previously married, 22 per cent have never been in a registered de jure marriage and the proportion of widows is small. Table 5.2 details the marital and de facto relationship history of the sole and married mother respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> Six cases which met the definition of sole or married mother were excluded after exploration of the data revealed contradictory responses. One sole mother case was excluded because she recorded a partner in the Income Unit (INCUNIT) variable. A further sole mother case and five married mother cases were excluded because no children were listed as living in the family home under the number of children in the household (NOCHHH) variable.

**Table 5.1: Legal Marital Status of Sole and Married Mothers**

Legal Marital Status	Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %
Never married	22.2	0.0
Married	0.0	100.0
Married/Separated	26.4	0.0
Divorced	45.1	0.0
Widowed	6.3	0.0
N	144	441

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Also, as can be seen from Table 5.2, for a large majority of the previously-married sole mothers, this marriage was their only marriage relationship. The average duration of this marriage is 10 years. A de facto relationship prior to marriage is equally common for the sole and married mothers, with a mean duration of this relationship of five years for sole mothers and six years for married mothers. The mean age at marriage of the previously-married sole mothers (21.9 years) is significantly younger than the mean marriage age of the married mothers (23.4 years) ( $t = -3.575, df = 550, p = .000$ ). Of the never-married sole mothers ( $n = 32$ ), a large majority (84 per cent) had previously lived in a de facto relationship, with these relationships lasting an average of 4.6 years.

**Table 5.2: Marital and Relationship History – Sole and Married Mothers**

Marital and Relationship History	Sole Mothers (n = 144) %	Married Mothers (n = 441) %
<i>Times Married</i>		
Never	22.2	0.0
Once	68.1	95.7
Twice	9.0	4.3
More than twice	0.7	0.0
<i>Defacto before First Marriage</i>	(n = 113)	(n = 440)
Yes	44.2	44.3
No	55.8	55.7

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

### 5.3 Analytical Techniques

Analysis of the three research question dimensions outlined in Chapter Four requires the use of a variety of descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The primary purpose for the use of each of these quantitative techniques is to compare and contrast the sample of sole and married mother respondents across the range of NLC



data that measure relationships to the labour market. In this chapter, bivariate analysis is used to examine the demographic, family circumstances, family background, educational and economic characteristics of the sole and married mother respondents. In these analyses, the chi square statistic and the t-test statistic are used to indicate where statistical differences between the groups occur. These techniques are expanded in Chapter Six, which explores the interaction of parenting and market work. In Chapter Six, bivariate and factor analytic techniques are used to compare the respondent groups' attitudes and values around motherhood and labour market participation. In the factor analysis the extraction method used is principal axis factoring and the rotation method is oblimin and kaiser normalisation rotation. One-way ANOVA techniques are also used to examine the within-group differences in motherhood values and attitudes. In Chapter Seven, the circumstances and situations of the respondents in relation to labour market participation are examined. Bivariate and t-test statistical techniques are utilised to compare the sole and married mother respondents in their orientation towards the labour market. Individual areas of analysis include the current level of labour market activity, types and modes of work, use of childcare, actual employment description and circumstances, as well as attitudes towards employment and reasons for current level of labour market activity. In Chapter Eight, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques are used to gauge the importance of a range of demographic, employment and family circumstance variables to the level of material well-being of sole and married mother households.

## **5.4 Defining the Variables**

In the main, definitions are outlined within the appropriate results section. In particular, to maintain continuity, the definition and operationalisation of this study's three measures of material well-being is undertaken in Chapter Eight, alongside the analysis in which they are utilised. However, due to the complexity, importance and multiple uses of the imputed income variables in these analyses, the definitions and computations used to develop this set of variables are described below.

### 5.4.1 Computing the Income Variables

The NLC dataset comprises a wide range of income related variables. These include detailed information on annual income from wages and salary; business or self-employment income; Social Security income, including pensions, Newstart and other unemployment related payments, Partners and Parenting Allowances, Family Allowances or other child-related payments; income from other sources such as rents and interest; child maintenance; and partners' income. The following section details the methods used to construct and align the various income variables.

- *Respondents' Income*

Details of earnings income are provided by respondents in various forms. For example, 82 per cent of working respondents provide income details relating to wages and salary as a gross figure while the other 18 per cent of employed respondents provide income details in net terms. Additionally, although income from wages and salary is requested as an annual figure, approximately a quarter of respondents provided their weekly income, and another eight per cent provided a fortnightly figure. To align these data a new annual wage variable 'wage' was computed using 1995/96 tax scales to convert net wages to gross wages (Ackland 2002). This imputed variable is used in the following analyses<sup>2</sup>. Seventy-three respondents report that they received business or self-employment income for the financial year 1995/1996 in q239 and 72 of these respondents then provide an annual estimate of that self-employment or business income in q240<sup>3</sup>.

- *Partners' Income*

Within the NLC survey each partnered respondent is asked to estimate his or her partner's income. Estimate measures are recorded using a series of graded income brackets in annual and weekly figures, beginning with \$1–\$2,079 per annum or \$1–

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<sup>2</sup> Within the sole and married mother respondent sample, 23 cases (4 sole mothers and 19 married mothers) had missing data on this variable. Alignment of this variable with data on the current employment status of respondents finds 7 cases (3 sole mothers and 4 married mothers) that report that they are not currently employed. The value of the wage variable on these seven cases is adjusted to zero dollars. For the remaining 16 cases (one sole mother and 15 married mothers) where the respondents report that they are currently in employment, the mean variable value for each group (\$26,433 for sole mothers and \$22,147 for married mothers) is substituted in this variable.

<sup>3</sup> There is one missing value, but given the very wide range of values on this variable (\$99 per annum to \$100,000 per annum) it is not deemed appropriate to substitute the mean on this variable. The one missing value case is treated as having zero annual business or self-employment income.

\$39 per week as the lowest bracket and \$78,000 or more per annum or \$1,500 per week or more per annum at the highest. To gain an annual income figure for partners' income, the median of each category is calculated by fitting a normal distribution to the log of the income data. This provides a median 'representative' value for each group. For example in the open-ended top group, this value is \$111,090 per annum (Ackland 2002). This imputed variable 'Inc\_Part', INCOME OF PARTNER is used in these analyses<sup>4</sup>.

- *Social Security Income*

Respondents are also asked to nominate their total fortnightly payment from government pensions, benefits or allowances<sup>5</sup>. This fortnightly figure is computed to an annual figure:

$$\text{Annual Social Security Income} = \text{Total fortnightly payment} \times 365.25$$

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- *Child Maintenance Income*

Sixty-four sole mothers and no married mothers report receiving a weekly amount of child maintenance<sup>6</sup>. The child maintenance weekly income data are translated to an annual figure:

$$\text{Annual Child Maintenance Income} = \text{Total weekly payment} \times 365.25$$

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- *Other Income*

The NLC survey data also include an estimate of respondents' other income, such as rents, dividends or interest earned. Ninety-seven respondents report such 'other

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<sup>4</sup> Among the married mother respondents, 10 cases did not know their partner's income and 12 cases refused to provide partner income details. Within these 22 cases, 16 respondents report that their partner is in employment. For these cases, an education function (Income of Partner/Years of Education Partner) is used to estimate a range of mean 'Inc\_Part' value and the appropriate value is substituted for each case based on the educational level of the partner. For those 7 cases where the respondent reports that her partner is not in employment, a value of zero dollars per annum is substituted in this variable.

<sup>5</sup> There are 28 cases of missing data on this variable (3 sole mothers; 25 married mothers). These cases are matched against the individual social security items in q241\_1 to q242\_4. The 10 cases that do not report receipt of any of these individual payment types are classified as receiving no income from social security per annum. Those 4 cases that answer 'yes' to at least one of the items and the 14 cases that have missing data on all items have the group mean (sole mothers \$7,676 per annum; married mothers \$2,588 per annum) substituted in this variable.

<sup>6</sup> In one case, child maintenance receipt is indicated on q246 but no weekly amount is provided in q247. This case is treated as not being in receipt of child maintenance.

income'. This income data is treated as an annual figure and the 22 cases with missing data on this variable are classified as not being in receipt of 'other income'.

#### **5.4.2 Treatment of Missing Data**

Various techniques are used to deal with missing data. However, most variables used in these analyses contain very limited proportions of missing data. For example, on variables relating to the respondents' education level, or current employment status, there are no missing values in the sole and married mother respondent sample. Details of how missing data is treated on individual variables are provided where appropriate throughout the results chapters.

### **5.5 Reporting of Results**

The results of the analyses are reported in the next section of the current chapter and the following three chapters. In the current chapter, the results of the initial bivariate analysis of the sole and married mother respondents are detailed across a broad range of demographic, social and personal characteristics. As noted, the purpose of this analysis is, first, to provide baseline data for the later comparative analyses and, second, to compare broadly the results from the NLC dataset with other current data relating to sole mothers and married mothers. Where appropriate, results from these data are also compared with those from the ABS and other sources.

The results reported in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, each address a specific sub-question of the study's overarching question as detailed at the end of Chapter Four. To add analytical context, the results chapters also incorporate a theoretical and empirical discussion of the dimension being analysed. The focus of Chapter Six is the orientation of sole and married mothers towards combining motherhood and paid employment. Using the parenting and child related aspects of the NLC dataset, the differences and similarities in mothers' attitudes and values to the compatibility of motherhood and labour market activity are explored. In Chapter Seven, the orientation of the sole and married mothers towards labour market participation is examined. Chapter Seven includes the comparative results from data relating to the sole and married mothers' current employment status and experience, as well as detailing the attitudes, values and aspirations of respondents around paid market

work. An exploration of the efficacy of labour market participation to the level of household material well-being is undertaken in Chapter Eight. In particular, the comparative impact of the respondents' occupational, partnered, family and demographic characteristics is examined in relation to three different models of household material well-being.

## **5.6 Comparing the Sole and Married Mothers**

The following section summarises the comparative results of the demographic and social data contained in the NLC survey. Variables examined include age, educational level, ethnicity, family background and current family circumstances, housing tenure, social security receipt and a range of data relating to children. The main analyses compare the sole mother respondents with the married mother respondent group. In addition to this central comparison, bivariate analyses are also undertaken within the sole mother sample, comparing the demographic characteristics and backgrounds of the previously-married and never-married sole mothers. The reason for these within-group comparisons is the notion that differing routes into sole motherhood may reflect differing social backgrounds. Recent research data, both in Australia and the United Kingdom (see Birrell & Rapson 1998; Rowlingson & McKay 1998), suggest that the sub-group of never-married sole mothers tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than do previously-married sole mothers. These additional examinations, therefore, test the variation of characteristics among the sole mother sub-groups.

### **5.6.1 Demographic Background**

The basic demographic characteristic profile of the NLC data sample of sole and married mother respondents is broadly consistent with that found in previous statistical profiles of Australian sole parents and previously outlined in section 2.2 of Chapter Two (see ABS 1992; ABS 1997a; ABS 2001b, for example). As shown in Table 5.3, and in line with Australian and overseas data, the sole mothers tend to be both older and younger than married mothers (McHugh & Millar 1996; Bradshaw et al. 1996). While the sole mothers have a higher median age and are over-represented in the group aged 45 years and over, they are also over-represented among those aged 24 years and younger. This somewhat contradictory result reflects the variation

in the routes followed by women into sole motherhood. Never-married sole mothers tend to be younger than married mothers, while divorced and separated sole mothers are older, on average, than married mothers. As shown, more than three-quarters of the never-married sole mothers are aged less than 35 years, compared to about a quarter of the previously-married sole mothers. The ethnic background of the respondent groups is similar, with around 80 per cent of the sole and married mothers being Australian born. Among the never-married sole mothers, the proportion is slightly higher, with just over 90 per cent born in Australia.

**Table 5.3: Selected Characteristics—Sole and Married Mothers**

Demographic Characteristic	All Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %	Previously-Married Sole Mothers %	Never-Married Sole Mothers %
<i>Age*</i>				
Under 20	0.7	0.0	0.0	3.1
20–24	6.3	2.3	2.7	18.8
25–29	9.0	11.1	4.5	25.0
30–34	18.8	24.3	15.2	31.3
35–39	27.1	29.3	32.1	9.4
40–44	13.2	20.0	15.2	6.3
45–49	18.1	8.8	21.4	6.3
50 and over	6.9	3.9	8.9	0.0
<i>Country of Birth</i>				
Australia	81.9	80.7	79.5	90.6
English speaking country	12.6	9.2	15.1	6.2
Non-English speaking country	5.5	10.1	6.3	3.1
<i>Religious Affiliation*</i>				
No religion, agnostic or atheist	32.6	22.9	29.2	43.8
Roman Catholic	25.7	26.8	27.4	18.8
Anglican	20.1	20.6	20.4	18.8
Other Christian	21.4	26.7	23.0	18.6
Non-Christian	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.0
<i>No. of Children*</i>				
One child	30.5	18.4	20.5	65.6
Two children	34.0	44.2	37.5	21.9
Three children	20.1	23.6	25.0	3.1
Four or more children	14.5	13.8	16.1	9.9
<i>Ages of Children*</i>				
One pre-school aged child	25.9	33.1	10.7	31.2
Two or more pre-school children	3.6	14.7	1.8	6.3
Has primary school aged child	61.8	60.1	62.5	59.4
N	144	441	112	32

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$   
Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Significant differences are found in data relating to the religious affiliation of the two groups. While the sole and married mothers are equally represented within the main Christian religions, the sole mothers are significantly more likely to record that they have no religion, or that they are atheist or agnostic. Although unable to be ascertained from these data, the likely explanation for this disparity is that those with stronger religious beliefs are less likely to contemplate marital separation or ex-nuptial child bearing.

Again consistent with other data outlined earlier in Chapter Two (Saunders & Matheson 1990; McHugh & Millar 1996; Whiteford 1997; ABS 2001b), the sole mothers have, on average, fewer dependent children than do the married mothers. Most of this difference, however, can be explained by the almost two-thirds of never-married sole mothers with only one child. If the previously-married sole mothers and married mothers only are compared, then the gap in the number of dependent children is considerably reduced. Similarly, the large proportion of never-married mothers with a pre-school age child masks the difference between the previously-married sole mothers and married mothers in this area. Only 12 per cent of the previously-married sole mothers have a pre-school age child, compared to nearly half of the married mothers. This disproportion is possibly due to the older average age of the previously-married sole mothers. Roughly equal proportions of the sole and married mothers have a primary-school age child.

### **5.6.2 Family Background**

As part of the NLC survey, respondents were asked a series of questions relating to childhood living circumstances and parental ethnic, employment and educational background. In the main, the family backgrounds of the sole and married mothers are analogous. Around 70 per cent of each group have Australian-born parents and a roughly equal majority of each were raised in a large city. As shown in Table 5.4, the educational and occupational background of each group's parents is also similar, although the sole mothers' fathers are likely to be more highly educated and have a professional or managerial occupation.

Within the sole mothers' group, however, there is some dissimilarity (data not shown here). The fathers of the never-married sole mothers are less likely to have held

managerial/professional or associate professional occupations (30 per cent;  $n = 8$ ) than the fathers of the previously-married sole mothers (52 per cent;  $n = 54$ ). Another area of difference is the age at which the sole mothers left the parental home. While the mean age of moving away from home for the sole mothers (19.1 years) was significantly younger than the mean age of leaving home for married mothers (19.8 years) ( $t = -2.253$ ,  $df = 570$ ,  $p = .025$ ), most of this variation is attributable to within-group differences. Never-married sole mothers left home at a substantially earlier age ( $M=18.4$ ) than did the previously-married sole mothers ( $M=19.3$ ), with 53 per cent ( $n = 17$ ) leaving home before their eighteenth birthday compared to 31 per cent of the previously-married sole mothers ( $n = 35$ ). Taken together, these differentials in paternal occupational status and respondent age at leaving home support the notion that the never-married sole mothers tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than do the previously-married sole mothers.

**Table 5.4: Family Background Characteristics – Sole and Married Mothers**

Family Background Characteristic	Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %
<i>Father's Occupation</i>		
Manager/Administrators	17.8	17.7
Professionals/Assoc. Professionals	30.2	27.2
Non-Managerial or Professional Occupation	52.0	55.1
<i>Father's Education</i>		
Secondary Schooling Only	67.5	68.7
Trade Certificate or Diploma	19.2	21.3
University	13.3	10.0
<i>Mother's Education</i>		
Secondary Schooling Only	82.5	84.3
Trade Certificate or Diploma	12.8	12.7
University	4.5	4.5
<i>Where Lived During Secondary School</i>		
Capital or Major City	58.3	54.4
Country town with population > 10000	14.6	16.3
Other	27.1	29.3
<i>Leaving Home</i>		
Left parental home before age 18	36.1	22.6
N	144	441

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$   
Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.



### 5.6.3 Educational Background

While the family backgrounds of sole and married mothers are quite similar, the groups' educational backgrounds are less equitable. As indicated in Table 5.5, the married mothers are significantly more likely to have completed the highest level of secondary school than the sole mothers. The married mothers (26.1 per cent) are also more likely to hold a bachelor degree or higher than the sole mothers (20.1 per cent). Although the sole and married mothers have a different age structure, age standardisation of this data (not shown here) only reduces the differential from six percentage points to 4.5 percentage points. This result is in line with previous educational level comparisons of sole and married mothers detailed in Chapter Two (Colledge 1990; Perry 1992; Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999). Despite this basic difference, however, similar proportions of each group report a post-school qualification. For both sole and married mothers, the proportion with a post-school qualification is significantly higher than ABS (1997a) estimates of 36 per cent and 42 per cent respectively. However, this difference may relate to a wider definition within the NLC data of what constitutes a post-school qualification. Also, as shown in Table 5.5, more sole mothers are currently studying, although sole mothers are less likely to be studying at the tertiary level.

These rates of current study for the sole mothers are significantly higher than previous estimates (Carberry, Chan & Hayworth 1996). Within the sole mother group, around 60 per cent of the never-married ( $n = 20$ ) and previously-married ( $n = 66$ ) sole mothers report an education level of 'incomplete secondary' (data not shown here). This evenness, however, is complicated by the younger age profile of the never-married sole mothers. With a female school retention rate to Grade 12 of approximately 75 per cent in the early 1990s (ABS 2002b), it would be expected that a higher proportion of this group would have completed Grade 12 than the older previously-married group. The previously-married sole mothers have a higher rate of post-school qualifications (56.3 per cent,  $n = 63$ ) than do the never-married mothers (43.8 per cent,  $n = 14$ ), but age standardisation of this data reverses this imbalance (not shown here). If the never-married sole mothers had the same age structure as the previously married sole mothers, around 66 per cent would be expected to hold a post-school qualification.

**Table 5.5: Educational Levels–Sole and Married Mothers**

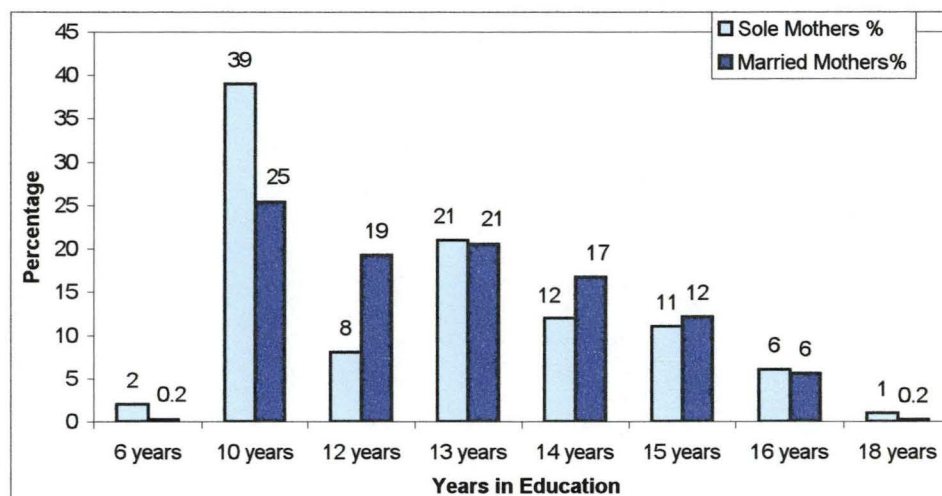
<b>Education</b>	<b>Sole Mothers (n = 144) %</b>	<b>Married Mothers (n = 441) %</b>
<i>Secondary Schooling*</i>		
Complete Secondary School to Highest Level	40.3	58.3
Incomplete Secondary	58.3	41.5
Primary Only	1.4	0.2
<i>Have Post School Qualification</i>		
Yes	53.5	58.0
No	46.5	42.0
<i>First Post-School Qualification</i>		
Postgraduate or Higher Degree	1.4	2.7
Bachelor or Undergraduate Degree	18.7	23.4
Assoc. Diploma or Skilled Voc. Qual.	7.0	5.0
Basic Vocational Qualification	20.1	20.2
Not Stated, Uncodeable or Out of Scope	6.5	6.8
No Post-School Qualification	46.5	42.0
<i>Current Study</i>		
Currently Studying Full-time	5.6	2.3
Currently Studying Part-time	9.7	7.0
<i>Current Field of Study</i>	<i>(n = 22)</i>	<i>(n = 44)</i>
Bachelor Degree or Higher	40.8	58.1
Undergraduate Degree/Associate Diploma	18.1	15.9
Basic Vocational Qualification	9.1	13.6
Not Stated or Out of Scope	31.8	9.1

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$   
 Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The high level of post-school qualifications among respondents acts to reduce the comparative validity of the basic educational level data. To overcome this limitation, schooling educational level data is combined with that relating to post-school qualifications to create a new imputed highest level of education variable, 'Education level – imputed'. This variable is then used to generate an imputed 'years of education' variable. The following translations are used to compute imputed educational level to imputed years of education: six years for primary only education; 10 years for incomplete secondary education; 12 years for complete secondary but no post-school qualifications; 13 years for basic vocational qualifications, regardless of their previous secondary educational level; 14 years for skilled vocational, undergraduate degree or associate diploma qualifications; 15 years for a bachelor degree; 16 years for postgraduate study and 18 years for those with higher degrees, such as masters or a doctorate. This variable, while imputed rather than directly gathered, operates to provide a broad reflection of the years of

education and/or training undertaken by respondents. As can be seen in Figure 5.1, while the pattern of years in education among the two groups varies, most of the difference is found amongst those with less years in education. The largest disparity is concentrated within the similar sized groups of sole and married mothers with 12 or less years of education. Sole mothers are over-represented among those imputed to have 10 years of education and under-represented among those imputed to have completed 12 years of education.

**Figure 5.1: Years of Education (Imputed)—Sole and Married Mothers**



Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97—Imputed.

This concentration of educational differences at the lower end of the educational scale suggests that such educational differences are not likely to be a major explanatory factor in the differences in employment rates between the two groups. This suggestion is supported by the analysis of census data to identify the determinants of Australian mothers' employment undertaken by Gray et al. (2002). In this study, using hypothetical scenarios, the probability of employment by sole mothers is predicted to rise by only 2.7 percentage points if the sole mothers had the same educational profile as the married mothers.

#### **5.6.4 Economic Position**

Concordant with other Australian data (see for example Ross & Saunders 1990; Saunders & Matheson 1990; McHugh & Millar 1996; Shaver 1998), the economic position of the sole mothers across the range of relevant variables is consistently, and substantially, lower than that of the married mothers. The following section summarises the relative position of the sole and married mother groups in relation to

social security, child maintenance and housing circumstances. Comparative analyses of other forms of household income, such as earnings, are included in Chapter Eight and are therefore not included in this section.

- *Social Security Receipt*

The sole mothers receive significantly higher rates of social security income than do the married mothers. While both groups report similar levels of receipt of Family Payments and Child Disability Allowance, the median fortnightly social security income of \$331.10 for the sole mother group is five times the \$68.23 median reported by the married mothers. As the existing variable relating to receipt of social security includes family payments, which are also paid to families who are not in receipt of any income support payment, it is not a good indicator of those respondents who would be classified as receiving welfare payments. A new variable 'Income Support Payment – Imputed' is therefore constructed by summing the dichotomous responses to the questions relating to specific income support payments: Age, Sole Parents, Carer's Disability Support, Wives, Widows and Veterans Affairs Pensions; Sickness, JobSearch, NewStart, Partners and Parenting Allowances, as well as Austudy, NEIS and Special Benefit.

Analysis of this new variable, as shown in Table 5.6, demonstrates that nearly two-thirds of the sole mother respondents are in receipt of an income support payment, compared to only one-fifth of the married mothers.

**Table 5.6: Socio-Economic Variables (Imputed)–Sole and Married Mothers**

Socio-Economic Variable	Sole Mothers	Married Mothers
	%	%
<i>Social Security</i>		
Receives Income Support Payment*	62.9	19.7
Receives Child Support	44.1	0.0
N	144	441

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$ .  
Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97–Imputed.

Although high, the proportion of sole mothers reporting receipt of an income support payment is lower than the FaCS (1998) estimated income support receipt rate of 77 per cent of all sole parents. The most common payment is Sole Parent's Pension, (now Parenting Payment (Single)), declared by 89 per cent ( $n = 80$ ) of the sole mothers on income support, and Parenting Allowance (now Parenting Payment (Partnered)), received by 69 per cent ( $n = 58$ ) of the married mothers on income

support. Thus, the welfare payment eligibility for the majority of both the sole and married mothers is based on their parenting responsibilities. The rate of income support receipt among the previously-married and never-married sole mothers (not shown here) is similar.

The rate of receipt of child support payments (44 per cent) and the average weekly amount received (\$72.00 per week) by the sole mothers is almost exactly the same as that recorded in official figures (Chalmers 1999; DSS 1998). Child maintenance payment amounts vary widely, ranging from \$626 per annum to \$21,654 per annum, with a median of \$3,652 per annum. The previous marital status of the sole mothers appears to be influential in determining receipt of child support (data not shown here). Around half ( $n = 54$ ) of the previously-married sole mothers report receiving child maintenance payments, compared to only 28 per cent of the never-married sole mothers ( $n = 9$ ). No married mother cases declared child maintenance payments for themselves or for their partners.

- *Housing Tenure*

Consistent with existing data, there are sharp differences in the housing situation of sole and married mothers (Saunders & Matheson 1990; ABS 2000b). As shown in Table 5.7, over 80 per cent of the married mothers record home ownership, while sole mothers are far more likely to be renting public housing.

**Table 5.7: Housing Tenure—Sole and Married Mothers**

Socio-Economic Variable	Sole Mothers	Married Mothers
	%	%
<i>Housing Tenure*</i>		
Fully owned home*	18.1	29.1
Purchasing home*	34.7	54.4
Public housing renter*	17.4	1.8
Private housing renter*	22.9	12.2
Neither	6.9	2.5
Now renting/ever owned*	17.4	7.0
N	144	441

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$   
Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

There are also significant housing tenure differences within the sole mother group (data not shown here). Only 25 per cent ( $n = 8$ ) of the never-married sole mothers report owning or purchasing a home, compared with 60 per cent ( $n = 68$ ) of the previously-married sole mothers ( $Chisq = 12.88$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Additionally 31

per cent (n = 10) of the never-married sole mothers are in public housing, compared to 13 per cent (n = 15) of the previously-married sole mothers.

### 5.7 Circumstances of Motherhood

As part of the NLC survey, respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the circumstances surrounding their entry into motherhood. Two specific aspects of these circumstances – the age of the respondent at the birth of their first child and the events that determined the timing of that birth – are examined here. The family circumstances of never-married mothers are also examined in closer detail. These data are important to the current study in that they provide additional context to the overall demographic picture of differences and similarities between the sole and married mother groups.

As shown in Table 5.8, the sole mothers are likely to have had their first child at a significantly younger age than the married mothers. This difference is starker when the data are grouped by age range, with nearly 20 per cent of the sole mothers giving birth to their first child before the age of 20.

**Table 5.8: Numbers and Ages of Children – Sole and Married Mothers**

	All Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %	Previously-married Sole Mothers %	Never-Married Sole Mothers %
<i>Age at First Birth*</i>				
First birth before age 20*	18.6	6.0	14.3	34.4
First birth before age 24*	57.0	37.8	51.8	75.0
Mean age at first birth**	24.3 years	26.3 years	25.9 years	22.6 years
N	144	441	112	32

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mothers significant at p < .05.  
 \*\* T-Test indicates differences between sole and married mothers significant at p < .05.  
 Data source. NLC Survey 1996/97

Some of this disparity, but not all, is explained by within-group differences among the sole mother respondents. The never-married sole mothers were substantially younger than both the previously-married sole mothers and the married mothers at the birth of their first child. Three-quarters of the never-married group gave birth to their first child before they were 24 years old. The events and circumstances determining the birth timing of the mothers' first child also vary significantly. As can be seen from Table 5.9, while unplanned birth is the most common circumstance

nominated by all mothers, more than half of the sole mothers report their first birth as ‘unplanned, it just happened’, compared to one-quarter of the married mothers. In contrast, the married mothers are more likely to report that their first child was born when they felt right about it.

**Table 5.9: Reasons for Having Children – Sole and Married Mothers**

	All Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %	Previously-Married Sole Mothers %	Never-Married Sole Mothers %
Unplanned, it just happened*	50.3	25.7	43.8	71.9
Failure of contraception	2.1	1.6	1.8	3.1
Wanted a child after marriage	6.9	11.6	8.9	0.0
Being established in my career	2.8	2.7	3.6	0.0
Partner established in their career	0.7	1.8	0.9	0.0
Having enough money to buy a house	1.4	4.1	1.8	0.0
Able to cope with demands of a child	2.1	2.7	1.8	3.1
Relationship with partner well-established	2.8	3.4	2.7	3.1
Time to enjoy myself before settling down	0.7	3.4	0.9	0.0
When I/we feel/felt right about it	18.6	25.3	20.5	12.5
Feeling financially secure	3.4	6.6	3.6	3.1
Other	8.3	10.9	9.8	3.1
N	144	441	112	32

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondent groups significant at  $p < .05$   
 Response rates relate to the first response given, although some respondents provided a second response to this question.  
 Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Among the sole mothers, the never-married sole mothers are even more likely to report that their first birth was an unplanned event. Even allowing for these sole mother within-group differences, however, the different rate of reporting the first birth as unplanned between the previously-married sole mothers and the married mothers is still strong. Thus, while the sole mothers tended to have their first child at a younger age than the married mothers, for many, this earlier birth was an unplanned event rather than a maternal choice. The married mothers’ responses around the circumstances of their first birth present a picture of greater choice and planning. The timing of the birth of a first child to coincide with older maternal age and when family circumstances are deemed suitable are likely to translate to greater financial security for the family and the mother herself. Family financial security has been noted as a significant factor in predicting marital stability (Birrell 2000). Being older at the birth of her first child is also likely to equate with longer, pre-birth, workforce experience for the mother. This greater work experience might, in turn,

affect the types and conditions of jobs accessible to mothers when they return to the labour market after bearing children. If so, the older age at first birth could result in married mothers also having labour market advantages over sole mothers.

### **5.7.2 Ex-Nuptial Children**

The circumstances surrounding the ex-nuptial birth of the first child of the never-married sole mothers was also explored. As noted earlier in this chapter, nearly 85 per cent of the never-married sole mothers had previously lived in a de facto relationship. In a further analysis of these data, the dates of birth of the children of never-married mothers is matched with the time span of the de facto relationship/s. This examination reveals that 81 per cent of the children of the never-married mothers were born either during a de facto relationship (70 per cent), or within nine months of a de facto relationship ending (11 per cent). In two cases, one child was born within a de facto relationship and the other not. Therefore, for more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of the never-married sole mothers, their child or children were born into a couple relationship. This figure is considerably higher than McDonald's (1995) previous estimate of 50 per cent of ex-nuptial births occurring within a de facto relationship. Therefore, the majority of the mothers were partnered at the time of their baby's conception. These data challenge the stereotypical picture of the never-married sole mother presented within the social threat discourse as an irresponsible, young, unpartnered or casually partnered woman, deliberately getting pregnant in order to gain welfare benefits. Importantly, if these cases are added to the previously-married sole mothers figures, then 93 per cent, an overwhelming majority of the sole mother households originally began as two-parent households.

## **5.8 Summary**

This initial comparison of the sole and married mother respondent groups provides contrasting results. While the ethnic and family background characteristics of both groups are similar, there are also areas of clear difference. In the examination of age, religious affiliation, educational level, age at first birth and reason for timing of first birth, significant differences between the two groups emerge. The disparity of the two groups is most obvious within the housing and social security data. Here, the comparatively disadvantaged position of sole mothers is incontrovertible.



At least some of the variance between the sole and married mother respondent groups is linked to the different profile of the never-married sole mothers. Statistically significant differences between the previously-married and never-married sole mothers are found in the respondent's age, religious affiliation, father's occupation, the age at which the respondent left home, the number and age of children, the level of home ownership and receipt of child maintenance variables. These data provide some support for the contention that never-married sole mothers tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than do the previously-married sole mothers or married mothers. Yet these within-group differences cannot account for all the differences between the sole and married mother respondent groups. The demographic variable differences may be explained by the fact that the previously-married sole mothers became sole mothers at the end of a marriage and are, therefore, older and have older children than do the currently married mothers. In the case of the economic disparity, this can be linked to the well-reported poverty associated with being a sole parent (this aspect is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight). However, even taking into account the influence of the never-married subgroup of sole mothers, the previously-married sole mothers still record lower levels of educational attainment, younger age at first marriage and at first birth and higher rates of unplanned first birth. These data might be seen as consistent with the conclusion of Birrell (2000), that sole motherhood is concentrated at the poorer end of the socio-economic hierarchy and linked to the greater impact of widespread economic restructuring on the financial security of this group. Yet the similar family background of the previously-married sole mothers and the married mothers does not offer any substantial support for this contention. While the married mother group, on average, tend to have higher levels of paternal and maternal education and paternal occupation status, these differences are not statistically significant. A clear explanation for these differences is, therefore, hard to develop.

Nonetheless, the overall results from these analyses of demographic, family background and socio-economic status are consistent with previous data from the ABS and other sources. In the next chapter, the analysis is extended to examine the attitudes and values of the sole and married mothers towards motherhood and the compatibility of mothering obligations and participation in the labour market.

## Chapter Six: Orientation to Motherhood

*Are sole mothers' perspectives on the compatibility of motherhood and labour market participation different to those of married mothers?*

### 6.0 Introduction

Is it possible to be both a good mother and a market employee? To what degree and in what circumstances can the two roles be combined? For all mothers, sole and married, these judgements are not simply a practical exercise, but hinge fundamentally on a woman's self-concept of motherhood, her ideological perceptions of what constitutes good motherhood and the interactions of these with her value system around paid work. Therefore, while social policy expectations and possible gains in household income are important contexts, sole mothers' decisions about paid work, like those of all mothers, are taken within a labyrinth of competing ideologies and discourses. Sole mothers' relationship with paid work, therefore, must be both negotiated and viewed within its social framework (Edwards & Duncan 1996).

This social framework means that the factors relevant to choices about labour market activity for sole mothers are neither gender free nor purely economic. For many, there is a basic ideological conflict between the self-sacrificing norms of motherhood and the economic behaviour of the paid worker. Indeed, market activity choices perceived as clashing with motherhood obligations may not be seen as a choice at all. This ideological divergence is not merely theoretical but has real life course ramifications. How all mothers negotiate and make sense of the competing ideologies impacts directly on current and future life chances, life options and socio-economic status. The economic and social costs embedded in motherhood are amplified for sole mothers. Additionally, the difficulties intrinsic to the mother/worker ideological divergence is magnified by sole mothers' seemingly irreconcilable position in family and welfare reform discourses.

This chapter addresses the sub-question associated with the first dimension of the over-arching research question, which asks whether the differing labour market participation rates of sole and married mothers is a reflection of a different orientation to motherhood. To begin, the chapter details the costs, consequences and contexts in which all mothers, but especially sole mothers, negotiate this maze of competing ideologies around labour market participation. The chapter then moves on to the analyses of the data relating to the parenting and child-related aspects of the NLC survey. The values and attitudes of the sole and married mother respondent groups towards their mothering role are examined from both the individual and the social context. The interaction of the respondents' social characteristics and orientation to motherhood, particularly in regard to the compatibility of labour market participation and mothering responsibilities, is also explored. In a further, related analysis, the impact of the transition from partnered to sole mother household on the labour market behaviour of sole mothers is investigated.

## **6.1 Costs, Risks and Choices of Motherhood**

While motherhood may indeed be the most important job in the world, the role incorporates significant costs and risks. Not only are the practical constraints of mothering often incompatible with market work, but the impact of women's choices about the appropriate mix of these roles reverberate throughout their life course. As outlined in Chapter Two, despite Australian mothers' rising presence in the workforce, their pattern of labour market participation continues to be dictated by their parenting-work role. Mothers are increasingly returning to paid work, but for the majority, employment is part-time or casual to facilitate their parenting obligations. This pattern, in turn, is in tune with the relatively conservative Australian ideals about appropriate mother roles. Australian social attitudes towards mothers' employment are contingent on the prioritising of parenting responsibilities. Women may combine motherhood and employment, but the mother role must retain primacy.

In purely financial terms, this primary caring role comes at considerable cost. Gray and Chapman (2001) conservatively estimate that a woman's lifetime earnings are reduced by around 34 per cent if she has one child by the age of 25 years, and more for subsequent children. These costs are magnified by the less easily quantifiable

wage penalties associated with reduced hours of paid work or absence from the workforce due to caregiving obligations, especially during the prime career-building years. In the case of the United States, Budig and England (2001) have calculated this motherhood wage penalty at around seven per cent per child. Women outside, or only marginally attached to, the labour market can also find it difficult to re-enter the workforce, especially to a job of similar status and prospects to that occupied before having children. For example, economic research finds that a history of part-time work operates to limit a woman's consequent ability to obtain full-time employment (Miller 1993).

Motherhood also negatively impacts on women's later life financial security. A recent study from Curtin University estimates that half of all women retiring in the next decade will have a 'nest egg' of less than \$20,000. The report attributes this low level of savings to women's role in rearing children. Fulfilment of this role in Australia normally results in years away from the workforce and high rates of part-time, casual and low paid work among mothers who are in the labour market (*Australian* 14 February 2002, p. 7). Motherhood, therefore, has large and negative financial consequences, with the price of motherhood continuing to be paid by women throughout their life course. These core costs of motherhood are summed up by Crittendon (2001) when she posits that the huge gift of un-reimbursed time and labour incorporated into the concept of motherhood 'explains in a nutshell why adult women are so much poorer than men, even though they work longer hours than men in almost every country in the world' (p. 8). As such, Crittendon stresses that while the gender wage gap is regularly discussed, the much bigger gap between the wages of mothers and childless women is perhaps more salient.

Integral to these costs is the comparatively low value placed on parenting work and the relationship between women's paid and unpaid work. Smart (1999) reflects that in liberal welfare states, full citizenship is increasingly available only to those deemed independent and self-reliant in terms of market work. The 'citizen virtue of the mothers' (Young 1995, p. 544, cited in Smart 1999) as primarily dependent or semi-dependent carers and nurturers of children is, therefore, diminished. Yet, despite the rising primacy of the market, 'liberal' welfare regimes such as Australia also encourage married mothers to put aside market work in order to meet the needs of their family. Thus, while neo-liberalism uses gender-neutral language in framing

its discourse around the rights and obligations of the possessive individual, it still retains the expectation that women will continue to accrue economic disadvantage and consequent vulnerabilities in the labour market because of their caregiving responsibilities. As Crittendon (2001) argues, for all the public rhetoric of rising female equality, such equality stops dead once a woman becomes a mother.

The financial and social costs of motherhood tend to be justified within market economies on the grounds of a private choice made in the private sphere. Such decisions are deemed a matter of parental choice regarding the most appropriate way for the family to provide the caring work needed to raise children. The fact that in the vast majority of families it is the mother who takes time out of the workforce to provide the unpaid caring work is viewed as merely indicating that this is the most 'sensible' family option. The 'discursive political rhetoric of choice' however, uses the guise of individual choice to mask the 'high structured set of opportunities and constraints, embedded in labour market and social policy conditions' (Cass 2002, p. 148). Questions about the value to society of child raising, or who benefits from mothers' investment in children, are not addressed (Folbre 1994; Donath 1995; England and Folbre 1999). On the basis of 'private choice' then, if mothers are: 'systematically handicapped in the labour market, if they find it very difficult to both raise children and earn a reasonable living, then that is the choice they made' (Crittendon 2001, p. 81). By placing the parenting work of producing the next generation within the private sphere, the labour and opportunity cost paid by mothers can be disregarded.

### **6.1.1 The Social Context of Choice**

Mothers' choices, however, are not made in a vacuum. In Australia, as in other liberal welfare regimes, they occur within a social system that, while promoting a self-sacrificing model of 'good motherhood', provides little real support for caring work. While this lack of mothering support affects all mothers, the welfare reform emphasis on market solutions amplifies the impact on sole mothers. Neo-liberal policy redefinitions of a sole mother as a worker/mother who supports her family have not led to other changes in the framework of policy logic (Hobson 1994). Thus, although welfare reform policies now obligate market activity for Australian sole mothers, no new caring services have been created or no support for caring work

legislated. Indeed within the same neo-liberalist policy framework as welfare reform, support for caring work has either been reduced or privatised.

This clash of policy direction is exemplified in the changes to childcare policy that have occurred simultaneously with demands for higher workforce activity by sole mothers. In line with the increasing proportion of Australian mothers in the labour market, the use of childcare surged in Australia from the mid-1980s. In 1996, 48 per cent of children aged 0–12 years were estimated to be utilising some form of non-parental childcare. Of these, 20 per cent used formal childcare services, with the other 28 per cent using informal care, predominantly provided by relatives (ABS 1997b). To facilitate supply, the Labor Government's *National Childcare Strategy* encouraged the establishment of private childcare services. Government-funded fee relief for low- and middle-income families, however, supported this free market approach, and in line with growth in demand, government expenditure on childcare grew from \$215 million in 1989–90 to \$1.1 billion in 1996/97 (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999).

This situation changed considerably with the election of the Coalition Government in 1996. The 1997/98 Federal budget cut \$800 million from childcare expenditure and added an income test to the Childcare Cash Rebate Scheme (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Despite avowals to the contrary<sup>7</sup>, these dramatic changes have had significant repercussions. Evidence suggests, moreover, that it is poor women who are the most adversely affected. A study commissioned by the NSW Government found use of childcare in the poorer areas of Sydney declined markedly between 1997 and 2000, while childcare usage in the more affluent areas remained the same. The report concludes that reductions in childcare funding mean that many poorer women can no longer afford to work. More recently, using the rationale that women and families need 'choice' about childcare, a policy push has begun to replace government subsidies with a voucher system (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Again, such a system will disproportionately disadvantage women from poorer areas where the lack of adequate childcare infrastructure will make such vouchers worthless.

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<sup>7</sup> FaCS reports that as a Senate enquiry found mothers' hours of work had not reduced it can then be assumed that reductions in childcare availability have had no impact (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999)

The importance of support for caring work in the choices and costs that accrue to motherhood is highlighted by a comparison of support in 'liberal' welfare states with that in 'social democratic' regimes. Baker (2000) contends that while 'liberal' and 'social democratic' welfare states share an expectation of market work as the basis of family well-being, the rising expectation of workforce participation has been introduced in 'liberal' states like Australia, the United States and New Zealand without providing the same social infrastructure. Similarly, Evans (1993) points to the extensive childcare system and parental leave available in Scandinavian countries to demonstrate the limited nature of caring support available to Australian mothers.

### **6.1.2 The Economic Policy Context of Choice**

The choice of paid work must also be viewed within the context of economic policy and labour market deregulation. The rising workforce participation of Australian mothers coincides with the growth of part-time and casual jobs. The over-representation of mothers in these jobs is generally attributed to the choices mothers make about integrating market work and household obligations (ABS 2001e). This explanation, however, is somewhat simplistic in nature and circular in operation. To what extent are Australian mothers' decisions about part-time work affected by choice, as opposed to the unsupported nature of their caring work? As Silva (1996b) argues, the lack of social support for caring in liberal welfare regimes compels women to fulfil family obligations and mothering demands through broken career patterns and flexible hours or home-based work. Additionally, trends towards the short and irregular part-time employment patterns is also linked to the market economy demand for labour market 'flexibility'. That is, the part-time, temporary and casual nature of much of the work undertaken by mothers is associated with a desire for flexibility on the part of employers, not mothers. Labour market trends, therefore, rather than being about mothers' 'choices' may instead reflect 'the inadequacies of social arrangements for women's proper career, pay and job security, notably the restricted provision of childcare' (Silva 1996b, p. 25).

### **6.1.3 The Life course Context of Choice**

The costs of motherhood are dramatically multiplied in the event of a major risk of motherhood, relationship breakdown. And this risk is substantial. As noted, the vast

majority of Australian sole mothers are in fact previously partnered mothers and current estimates indicate that between a third and a half of all Australian children will live in a sole parent family at some point in their childhood (ABS 1999a; ABS 1997a). Yet if a mother loses the financial support of her spouse, the costs amassed from her previous and ongoing child rearing obligations do not also disappear. While her unique mother-based pattern of labour market participation or non-participation may have been a matter of private family choice, the life course impact of such 'choice' rises dramatically should she become a sole mother.

Studies consistently point to an exacerbation of motherhood costs for those who move from partnered to sole mother status. More importantly, the multiplication factor is higher for mothers who prioritised caregiving in their two-parent family. In Birrell's (2000) analysis for example, mothers who left the workforce to raise children were especially financially disadvantaged after separation. Not only do they have less marital property to divide but their own reduced labour market skills also make them particularly economically vulnerable. Funder (1993) comes to a similar conclusion. In a longitudinal study of divorced Australian mothers, those outside the paid workforce during marriage were more likely to have an ongoing reliance on income support payments after separation. Weston and Smyth's (2000) study of divorced Australian couples also found that women who had performed the traditional stay-at-home role do consistently less well in property settlements than women who were in paid employment. Decisions taken in the marriage about paid work, therefore, impact on mothers' economic and social position after separation, with those mothers who 'choose' to prioritise caring and parenting work, appearing to pay the highest price.

#### **6.1.4 The Motherhood Context of Choice**

Overlying all these conceptions of choice are a mother's understanding of the compatibility of her mothering role and the obligations inherent in participating in the paid workforce. The importance of the motherhood context on the choice of labour market participation cannot be over-estimated. Understandings of what constitutes good mothering provide the dominant social and personal context for the decisions that sole and married mothers make about labour market activity. The



choice of participating in the labour market is not a choice at all, if a woman does not consider that paid employment is consistent with being a good mother.

Yet, while the motherhood context is dominant, the perceptions women hold about the compatibility of paid labour and their ability to mother their children vary. Some mothers give primacy to physically caring for their children and consider paid employment irreconcilable with motherhood. Others see paid work as an option, but only if they perceive that their participation will not adversely impact on their primary caring role. Still others consider full-time work as providing the best financial and social environment for their family. Belief systems around an appropriate combination of motherhood and workforce activity, therefore, have strong but variable moral dimensions (Duncan & Edwards 1999; Hakim 2000). The particular interpretation of these by individual sole mothers depends on the norms of the mothers' social milieu and the discourses surrounding mothering in general. These understandings of what it means to be a good mother in terms of workforce participation are encapsulated for sole mothers in Duncan and Edwards' (1999) concept of gendered moral rationalities. As outlined in Chapter Four, this thesis maintains that while all sole mothers hold a strong sense of responsibility for their children, sole mothers' attitudes on how best to honour those responsibilities differ. Those women classified as 'primarily mother' tend to give primacy to mothering and view paid work as fundamentally incongruent with good motherhood. Those classed as 'mother/worker integral' perceive the financial benefits of employment as aiding their mothering and those with a 'primarily worker' identity see paid work as an autonomous right, separate from their mother identity. These perspectives are held at the individual level but are negotiated and sustained within the mother's social milieu.

## **6.2 Comparing Attitudes and Values Towards Mothering**

The attitudes and values held by sole mothers towards motherhood and its compatibility with market work are, therefore, an essential ingredient in any analysis of the nature of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market. This inclusion of a motherhood dimension is made even more relevant by the current climate of welfare reform, where sole mothers are deemed to be making the 'wrong choice' about labour market participation and must have the 'right choice' mandated through

mutual obligation. The question here, then, is whether sole mothers hold different sets of attitudes and values towards mothering and paid work than do married mothers. The following analyses use the data from the NLC survey that reports the attitudes and values of the sole and married respondent groups around a range of parenting, work and family related items to examine this question.

### **6.2.1 Sole and Married Mother Groups Compared**

Respondents are asked to rate how strongly they agree or disagree with a range of value statements concerning parenthood and children. These responses are scored along an index of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating strong agreement with the statement and 5 indicating strong disagreement.

As outlined in Table 6.1, the response patterns of the sole and married mothers, although basically similar, are significantly different in six out of the seven parenting value statements. In items 2 and 3, the sole mothers are significantly more likely to believe that children have too great an impact on a mother's freedom, but less likely to agree that the same is true for fathers. Sole mothers are also significantly less likely to strongly agree with item 1, that a life without children is not complete; item 4, that watching children grow up is one of life's greatest joys; and item 7, that whatever a woman's career, her role of becoming a mother is the most important. They are similarly less likely to strongly disagree with item 5, that it is better not to have children because they are such a burden. Finally, the sole mothers are also more likely to agree with item 6, that working mothers can have just as secure a relationship with their children as a mother who does not work, although this variation is not statistically significant at the 0.5 level. Taken together, this variation in response pattern suggests that the sole mothers, as a group, while holding strong beliefs about the joys and rewards of motherhood, tend not to hold these values to quite the same degree as do the married mothers.

**Table 6.1: Attitudes Towards Parenting – Sole and Married Mothers**

<b>Attitudes to Children variable</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Mixed Feelings</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N</b>
<i>Item 1. A life without children is not really complete*</i>						
Sole Mother	27	37	3	32	1	144
Married Mother	37	39	2	21	2	440
<i>Item 2. Children have too great an impact on the freedom of the mother*</i>						
Sole Mother	16	27	1	48	8	144
Married Mother	8	39	1	44	8	440
<i>Item 3. Children have too great an impact on the freedom of the father*</i>						
Sole Mother	1	11	3	62	22	144
Married Mother	1	20	1	65	13	440
<i>Item 4. Watching children grow up is life's greatest joy*</i>						
Sole Mother	40	46	3	9	2	144
Married Mother	45	49	1	5	0	440
<i>Item 5. It is better not to have children because they are such a burden*</i>						
Sole Mother	1	1	3	51	45	144
Married Mother	0	0	1	43	56	440
<i>Item 6. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work</i>						
Sole Mother	27	49	4	17	3	144
Married Mother	23	43	5	25	4	440
<i>Item 7. Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of becoming a mother*</i>						
Sole Mother	17	37	1	39	6	144
Married Mother	22	38	4	34	2	440

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mothers significant at  $p < .05$

Data Source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

A factor analysis of statements about attitudes to children adds weight to this assumption. As shown in Table 6.2, factor analysis reveals two underlying factors. The first, labelled 'Motherhood Values', includes items 1, 4, 5, and 7, and relates to the value of children in a mothers' life. The scoring of item 5 was reversed to align its direction of measurement with that of the other items. The second factor, labelled 'Impact of Children', includes the items that relate to the impact of children on parents. Reliability statistics indicate that the items in each factor can be combined into a single scale with a low score indicating greater identification with the factor dimension. A t-test of difference in scale means indicates that, in factor 1, ('Motherhood Values') the married mothers have significantly lower rating than do the sole mothers ( $t = 3.725$ ,  $df = 578$ ,  $p = .000$ ). That is, the married mothers identify more strongly with 'Motherhood Values' than do the sole mothers. There are no

significant differences in the scores of the sole and married mothers on the second factor, 'Impact of Children'.

**Table 6.2: Factor Loadings For Items About Attitudes to Children**

Values Re: Children	Factor Loadings
<i>KMO</i>	.628
<i>Factor 1: Motherhood Values</i>	
Item 1: A life without children is not really complete	.60
Item 4: Watching children grow is one of life's greatest joys	.62
Item 5: Better not to have children because they are such a burden	.43
Item 7: Whatever career a woman may have her most important role is still that of becoming a mother	.56
Eigenvalue	1.92
Variance explained	32.05
Chronbach's Alpha	.61
$t = 3.725, df = 578, p = .000$	
<i>Factor 2: Impact of Children</i>	
Item 2: Children have too great an impact on the freedom of the mother	.73
Item 3: Children have too great an impact on the freedom of the father	.67
Eigenvalue	1.57
Variance explained	26.12
Chronbach's Alpha	.66
$t = .689, df = 578, p = .491$	

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring Rotation Method: Oblimin and Kaiser Normalisation Rotation.  
Data source: NLC survey 1996/97.

The sixth item detailed in Table 6.1, 'A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children', does not fit clearly within either factor and is not included in Table 6.2. This item is analysed separately and a t-test finds that the mean scores of the sole mothers in item 6 are significantly lower than those of the married mothers ( $t = -2.149, df = 553, p = .03$ ). That is, sole mothers, as a group, are significantly more likely to agree that working mothers are equally secure in their relationship with their children than married mothers. This finding indicates that even though sole mothers consistently record lower rates of labour market participation they are actually more likely than the married mothers to view paid work and motherhood as compatible.

Taken together, the foregoing results suggest that the sole mothers' orientation to motherhood does not conform to the traditional values around motherhood as strongly as that of the married mothers. This pattern can be seen right across the set

of parenting values statements, including the compatibility of employment and motherhood as expressed in item 6, and beliefs about the primacy of the mothering role as per item 7. No explanation for these findings can be established from these data, but it may be that the lived experience of sole parenthood tends to remove some of the gloss from the 'traditional ideals' of motherhood. A woman's identity with, and belief in, the ideology of the 'good' self-sacrificing mother who puts her mothering duties ahead of her own aspirations may be harder to sustain when confronted with the difficulties, hardships and contradictions inherent in sole motherhood. However, it is also important to note that while significant differences between the two groups are observed, these differences concentrate in the extent to which the groups agree or disagree with the statements. The overall pattern of values held by the sole and married mothers about motherhood and children are very positive and very similar.

### **6.2.2 Attitudes and Values Within the Mother Groups**

These analyses allow an interpretation of the basic mother/worker orientation of the entire sole and married mother groups. However, what they do not indicate is whether these values and attitudes are shared equally among the groups of mothers. Are all sole mothers more likely to be slightly less traditional in their motherhood-related views? Or do variations in attitudes and values towards mothering exist within the sole and married mother groups? If the latter is so, as suggested by the concept of gendered moral rationalities, are these variations associated with specific social and demographic characteristics?

A closer analysis of the pattern of responses detailed previously in Table 6.1 reveals that there is considerable disparity in attitudes and values within the two groups of mother respondents. While a general response consensus exists among the mothers on items 3 and 5, where over 80 per cent of each group disagree that children are too much of a burden or have too great an impact on the father, and item 4, where around 90 per cent agree that watching children grow is one of life's greatest joys, the proportions agreeing or disagreeing with the other value items is more evenly split. For example in item 7, relating to the importance of motherhood over career, around 54 per cent of the sole mothers and 60 per cent of the married mothers agree that motherhood is a woman's most important role, while 45 and 36 per cent respectively

disagree with this value statement. This within group division suggests that each mother group may encompass specific sub-groups of mothers, each holding differing sets of values around motherhood, parenting and children and paid work.

For this research, items 6 and 7, which incorporate elements relating to the appropriate combination of motherhood and employment, are especially relevant. The sixth item, 'A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work', specifically refers to the compatibility of paid work with good motherhood. The seventh item, 'Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role is still that of becoming a mother', can be viewed as a generic item relating to the relative prioritisation of motherhood in a woman's life. These two items summarise the 'gendered moral rationalities' that mothers hold about their mother identity, and particularly about their responsibilities towards children in relation to their participation in paid work. While Duncan and Edwards (1999) apply this concept to sole mothers only, for the present analysis, it is also useful in evaluating the beliefs and attitudes of the married mother respondents.

Mothers' scores on these two items are then tested against a range of socio-economic variables and demographic variables. These are detailed in Table 6.3 and include: housing tenure and rental type; importance of religion; education level; employment status; receipt of an income support payment; father's occupational level, age group; whether the mother has a pre-school child and the number of children that a mother has. These particular items are selected for several reasons. First, among the socio-economic variables available in the NLC dataset, variables such as education level, receipt of income support and housing tenure and father's occupation allow the clearest assessment of the impact of the mother's position in the socio-economic hierarchy. Second, on the demographic variables, the age of the mother and the age and number of her children, allow for the influence of these important variables to also be considered. The mother's employment status is also clearly relevant. The relevance of the importance of religion to the mother variable is less clear-cut, but is included because the mother's religious beliefs may impact on her belief systems around the compatibility of motherhood and paid work.

A comparison of within-group means on item 6, the specific motherhood/employment compatibility item, reveals that in a similar manner to Duncan and Edwards' (1999) analysis, the pattern of responses can be linked to socio-economic and demographic variables. This social patterning indicates that among the sole and married mothers, different sub-groups of mothers differ in their gendered moral rationalities around the compatibility of motherhood and paid work. As detailed in Table 6.3, these patterns vary across factors, and, in some areas, across the partnered status of the mother. For the sole and married mother groups, public housing tenants and income support recipients have significantly higher item mean scores. That is, those living in public housing and those receiving income support payments tend to view paid work as essentially detrimental to 'good' motherhood. If these variables are taken as a proxy for social class then the results are consistent with those of Duncan and Edwards (1999) and indicate that a 'primarily mother' perspective is more common among women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These results are also consistent with qualitative Australia data (see Cowling 1998; Swinbourne 2000) which find that sole mothers with lower levels of education and market skills are more likely to perceive paid work as morally and physically inconsistent with mothering work. Conversely, those who rent privately and are not in receipt of income support tend more towards the 'mother/worker integral' category, indicating a belief that labour market participation is consistent with good mothering.

The mean scores of the sub-groups in the other socio-economic status linked variables, education level and father's occupation, while showing a similar pattern of lower means among those with higher education and fathers with professional or managerial occupations, are not different enough to be statistically significant. For the married mothers, the relatively high mean score confounds the educational pattern for those with a higher degree or post-graduate qualification. The explanation for this anomaly is unclear. The importance of religion is also a significant factor for both groups, with those who rate religion as important or very important tending more towards the 'primarily mother' category. This result makes intuitive sense, as it would be expected that mothers from religious backgrounds are likely to hold more conservative views of a mother's role.

**Table 6.3: Attitudes To Children Item 6: Comparison of Means**

*'A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work'*

Variable	Mean		F statistic		Sig.	
	Sole Mother	Married Mother	Sole Mother	Married Mother	Sole Mother	Married Mother
<i>Housing Tenure df=2</i>						
Owned/Being Purchased	2.3	2.4	1.211	1.353	.301	.260
Rented	2.0	2.5				
Neither	2.1	3.0				
<i>Rental Type df=1</i>						
Public	2.4	3.6	4.552	8.783	.037*	.004*
Private	1.8	2.3				
<i>Importance of Religion df=3</i>						
Very important	2.7	2.7	3.104	3.135	.029*	.025*
Important	2.5	2.5				
Somewhat important	2.0	2.3				
Not at all important	2.0	2.3				
<i>Education Level df=5</i>						
Higher/postgrad. degree	1.9	2.7	.613	1.881	.690	.097
Undergrad/bachelor degree	2.2	2.2				
Skill voc./assoc. diploma	2.0	2.2				
Basic vocational	2.0	2.4				
Complete secondary	2.4	2.4				
Incomplete secondary	2.3	2.7				
<i>Current Employment Status df=1</i>						
Not employed	2.4	2.9	1.308	36.583	.274	.000*
Part-time work	2.2	2.4				
Full-time work	2.0	1.8				
<i>Father's Occupation df=3</i>						
Manager/prof./assoc. prof.	2.2	2.4	.026	.751	.387	.872
Other occupation	2.2	2.5				
<i>Age df=3</i>						
Under 25	2.4	1.9	3.373	2.599	.020*	.052
25-34	2.0	2.6				
35-44	2.0	2.3				
Over 45	2.6	2.6				
<i>Have Pre-School Child? df=1</i>						
Yes	2.2	2.3	.002	3.020	.968	.083
No	2.2	2.5				
<i>Receive Income Support df=1</i>						
Yes	1.9	2.3	4.374	15.852	.038*	.000*
No	2.3	2.9				
<i>Number of Children df=3</i>						
One	2.1	2.5	4.360	.389	.027*	.678
Two	1.9	2.4				
Three or more	2.5	2.5				

\* Indicates that the within sole and married mother group differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

Data Source: NLC 1996/97



Similarly, the age of the mother has an impact for the sole and married mothers. Although the pattern of response means is not straightforward, mothers over the age of 45 in both groups appear less likely to view work as appropriate for mothers. The number of children, however, is only a significant factor for the sole mothers, with most of the difference in means limited to those few sole mothers with three or more children.

Somewhat surprisingly, the age of the child is not a factor for either the sole or married mothers. Those with a pre-school age child are no more likely to consider working as inappropriate to motherhood as those with older children. This congruence may reflect the greater acceptance of the mother/worker combination among younger married mothers. However, as shown, sole mothers under the age of 25 have a higher mean and appear to hold more 'primarily mother' gendered moral rationalities. The high proportion of never-married sole mothers in this age group who, in turn (as indicated in the previous chapter), tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, might explain this apparent discrepancy. The non-significance of the age of the youngest child is also revealing given the child-age focus of recent welfare reform initiatives. Under mutual obligation principles, sole parents are obliged to participate in labour market related activities from the time their youngest child is six years old (Centrelink 2001a). Thus, within social policy guidelines, work and sole motherhood are only considered incompatible when a sole mother has a pre-school age child. However, as these results indicate, sole mothers do not necessarily share this perspective.

Interestingly, while current employment status is clearly a significant factor for the married mothers, it is not significant for the sole mothers. Although the pattern of responses is similar, with those currently working full-time more likely to view paid work as compatible with motherhood than those not in employment, the differences in means among the sole mother group are much smaller. Thus, while the married mothers' employment status mirrors their belief systems about work and mothering, the same is not true for the sole mothers. This result suggests that for sole mothers, current employment status might more closely reflect their ability to access the labour market, rather than their belief system around mothering and paid employment.

On item 7, which reflects a more generic view on the appropriate prioritisation of motherhood, the social patterning of the within-group mothers' responses is more ambiguous. As shown in Table 6.4, the relative importance of religion remains a factor for married mothers only. This distinction may relate to the significantly higher proportion of sole mothers who report having no religion or being agnostic or atheist (see Chapter Five). Similarly, being a home owner is a strong factor for sole mothers, but does not feature for the married mothers. Home owning or home purchasing sole mothers have significantly higher mean scores on this item and therefore less strongly in agreement that becoming a mother is the most important role in a woman's life than those who are not home owners or purchasers. Given the smaller proportion of sole mothers who are home owners (see Chapter Five), this may indicate that, for sole mothers, home ownership is more indicative of social class than it is for married mothers. This result is also consistent with Duncan and Edwards' (1999) finding that home owning sole mothers are more likely to hold 'mother/worker integral' or 'primarily worker' values systems about motherhood and paid employment than are non-home owners. In contrast to the results from the previous analysis of item 6, on item 7 the type of rental tenancy and the income support receipt status of the respondent are not significant factors for either the sole or married mothers.

The mothers' employment status is also not significant on this item. This lack of significance, particularly for those mothers who are currently in employment, is interesting, given that the item reflects the general value placed on the role of motherhood over job or career choice. It appears that both the sole and married mothers may participate in full-time employment yet still hold the view that paid work, while compatible with motherhood, is less important than overall mothering responsibility. This finding is consistent with Australian social attitudes towards mothers' workforce participation. Mothers can work, but they are mother/worker not worker/mother, and their employment obligations must not take precedence over their mothering responsibilities.

**Table 6.4: Motherhood Values Item 7: Comparison of Means**

<i>'Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of becoming a mother'</i>						
Variable	Mean		F statistic		Sig.	
	Sole Mother	Married Mother	Sole Mother	Married Mother	Sole Mother	Married Mother
<i>Housing Tenure df=2</i>						
Owned/Being Purchased	3.1	2.5	6.005	.033	.003*	.968
Rented	2.5	2.5				
Neither	2.1	2.5				
<i>Rental Type df=1</i>						
Public	2.2	2.7	2.435	.325	.124	.571
Private	2.7	2.5				
<i>Importance of Religion df=3</i>						
Very important	2.5	2.3	.617	3.014	.605	.030*
Important	2.7	2.6				
Somewhat important	2.8	2.5				
Not at all important	2.9	2.7				
<i>Education Level df=5</i>						
Higher/postgrad. degree	4.0	3.0	4.140	1.295	.002*	.265
Undergrad/bachelor degree	3.2	2.6				
Skill voc/assoc. diploma	3.3	2.4				
Basic vocational	2.4	2.5				
Complete secondary	3.1	2.6				
Incomplete secondary	2.5	2.3				
<i>Current Employment Status df=1</i>						
Not employed	2.6	2.5	1.253	.191	.289	.662
Part-time work	2.9	2.6				
Full-time work	3.0	2.5				
<i>Father's Occupation df=3</i>						
Man/prof./Assoc. prof	3.0	2.8	1.913	7.234	.169	.007*
Other occupation	2.7	2.4				
<i>Age df=3</i>						
Under 25	2.5	2.9	.473	2.023	.701	.110
25-34	2.7	2.3				
35-44	2.9	2.6				
Over 45	2.8	2.7				
<i>Have Pre-School Child? df=1</i>						
Yes	2.8	2.5	.056	.191	.814	.662
No	2.8	2.6				
<i>Receive Income Support df=1</i>						
Yes	.28	2.6	.047	.266	.828	.607
No	.28	2.5				
<i>Number of Children df=3</i>						
One	2.7	2.5	.709	.035	.494	.965
Two	3.0	2.5				
Three or more	2.7	2.5				

\*Indicates that the within sole and married mother group differences are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level  
 Data Source NLC 1996/97.

In contrast to the previous results, in item 7, the level of the mother's education has become highly significant. For the sole mothers, the mean score rises with level of

education, indicating that the more highly educated the sole mother is, the less likely she is to be aligned with a 'primarily mother' value system. The very high mean value of sole mothers with a higher or post-graduate degree level of education indicates that these mothers hold a more 'primarily worker' perspective on the compatibility of paid work and motherhood. The same pattern is seen with the married mothers, but the mean differences between the more and less educated are not as stark. Similarly, the occupation of the respondent's father is only a significant factor for married mothers. For sole mothers, while the pattern is similar, the differences are not enough to be statistically significant.

Therefore, while the results from item 7 indicate a similar alignment of a more 'primarily mother' gendered moral rationality among those respondents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the pattern is not as easily discernible as in item 6. This variation in outcome by motherhood item suggests a difference in mothers' specific and general attitudes towards work and motherhood. While social class differences can be clearly ascertained in how sub-groups of sole and married mothers directly view the congruency of paid work and motherhood, the more general view of the high priority of motherhood in a woman's life is more evenly held among mothers from all social groups. However, this conclusion should be treated with some caution. Part of the explanation for the lower clarity of response patterns for item 7 may lie in the wording of the question. Respondents rated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the importance of a woman becoming a mother. Given that all the respondents in this sample are already mothers, if the statement had read instead: 'Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother', then the response pattern may have been different.

### **6.2.3 Patterns of Gendered Moral Rationalities**

So, what do these results mean in the context of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market? Overall, the analysis indicates the existence of sub-groups within both the sole and married mother categories, which are analogous to Duncan and Edwards' (1999) mother identity typologies. Moreover, these sub-groups tend to be aligned with the socio-economic background of the sole and married mothers. Mothers from both groups who are public housing renters and in receipt of income support payments, tend to hold attitudes and beliefs that are consistent with the

'primarily mother' category of gendered moral rationalities. Conversely, those mothers renting privately and not on income support tend more towards 'mother/worker integral' or 'primarily worker' gender moral rationalities in relation to the compatibility of mothering and labour market participation. These results suggest that, for both sole and married mothers, beliefs about the importance of motherhood and the compatibility of motherhood and labour market activity are more closely related to socio-economic situation than they are to the mother's partnered status. The divergence between the sole and mother respondents is also highly salient. On item 6, the current employment status is highly statistically significant in predicting the married mothers' level of agreement with this item, but is non-significant for the sole mothers. Thus, there is a direct and clear correlation between the belief systems and workforce behaviour of the married mothers, but this pattern is more muted for the sole mothers. This finding is important. It indicates that, for sole mothers, factors other than personal value systems around motherhood and paid work are inhibiting the level labour market activity.

### **6.3 The Partnered to Sole Mother Transition**

The impact of family breakdown on the workforce behaviour of sole parents may be one of these factors. While sole and married mothers may be dichotomised within social policy, the majority of Australian sole mothers have undergone a process of transition from being a married/partnered mother to being a sole mother. Marital or partnership separation is experienced, almost without exception, as a crisis involving dislocation, stress and one that requires multiple strategies for readjustment (Funder 1993). As such, sole mothers' continued attachment or reattachment to the labour force must be vulnerable to the life circumstances and mothering demands surrounding family breakdown. While both parents must negotiate the financial and personal crisis related to separation, the risks and the transition adjustments are greater for the sole parent household. A British study (Jarvis & Jenkins 1998) confirms the impact of separation on mothers' labour force participation. While fathers' employment rates declined a little, mothers' employment rates reduced from 47 per cent to 35 per cent in the year after separation. The authors thus concluded that separation appears to disrupt mothers' careers significantly than those of fathers (p. 115).

Australian literature on this topic is sparse, with most commentary limited to a passing mention. For example, the Social Security Review of the mid-1980s concluded that the low workforce participation of sole parents was not surprising given the amount of time needed to adjust to sole parenthood. Sole mothers in work when separation occurs, it was reasoned, are likely to withdraw from the labour market temporarily to cope with the new demands, while new sole mothers who have been out of the labour market previously are unlikely to be able to take up employment immediately (Colledge 1990). Other relevant literature includes the responses provided in qualitative studies of sole parents. Swinbourne et al. (2000, p. 32) suggest that a common response by women to becoming a sole parent is to decide to 'put one's family first', especially if there are young children involved or the separation has been particularly traumatic. In labour market terms, this primacy of the family means that paid work is curtailed or given up to allow extra time for children, despite the financial hardship this decision entails. In a similar manner, Cowling's study (1998, pp. 27-29) includes reports of mothers giving up part-time work following the break-up of their marriage because the 'kids couldn't cope'. Along the same lines (Morehead 2002) suggests that new sole parents need to recreate their relationship with the labour market to achieve a 'sole parent domestic arrangement' (p. 57). A statistical picture of women's post-separation employment is provided by Funder (1993) in a follow-up of divorced Australian parents. In this study, approximately half of the mothers employed at the time of marital separation had moved out of the workforce four to six years later. Factors linked to leaving paid work were: lower educational qualifications; a non-professional occupation; not being active in the separation decision; and not repartnering in the shorter term. The transition from being a partnered to a sole mother household is, therefore, an important factor in sole mothers' level of labour market participation. Yet, to date, no Australian research examines sole mothers' employment patterns in relationship to the marital separation event itself. For example, how does this transition impact on the workforce behaviour of sole mothers? Do the gendered moral rationalities applied by mothers in two-parent households hold during and after the transition to a sole mother household? These questions are not directly addressed in welfare reform discussion, yet, as shown earlier, over 90 per cent of the sole mothers in this sample were originally mothers within a partnered relationship. The overwhelming majority of Australian sole mother families, therefore, have at some time needed to negotiate the transition from a married/partnered to a sole mother household.

## 6.4 Marital Separation and Mothers' Work Patterns

So does the marital breakdown event and aftermath influence the level of labour market activity among Australian sole mothers? If so, how much and for how long? To answer this question, data from the NLC work history items are matched with the NLC marital history data to produce a series of data describing work status for the three years before the year of the mother's final marital separation, the year the marriage ended and the five years after the year of marital separation. In this analysis, the year of marital separation refers to the year in which the couple actually separated and is not the year of legal marital divorce.

The sample for the analysis of these data is restricted to those sole mother respondents with a resident child aged less than 18 years, who were previously in a registered *de jure* marriage and are not currently living with a husband or another male partner. This definition yields a sub-sample of 112 cases<sup>8</sup>. The year nominated by respondents as the year the final separation of their marriage occurred is utilised as the base year. In the 12 cases with more than one marriage, the year the most recent marriage ended is selected. This base year is then matched with data detailing mothers' work modes (not working; working full-time; working part-time) in each of the three years prior to the end of the marriage, the base year, and for each of the five years after the year of marital separation, or for as many years that the respondent had been separated if less than five years. The three year pre-separation time frame is selected as a period long enough to establish a marital work history, but short enough to minimise the effect of the birth of children on workforce participation rates. The age of the mother's youngest child in the base year is also computed. In the 10 cases where the youngest child is born after the end of the marriage, the age of the child that was the youngest at the time of that marriage end is substituted.

### 6.4.1 Marital Characteristics, Work History and Marital Separation

The length of time elapsed since the marital separation of the respondents varies significantly, ranging from 30 years to only a few months. Around half of the

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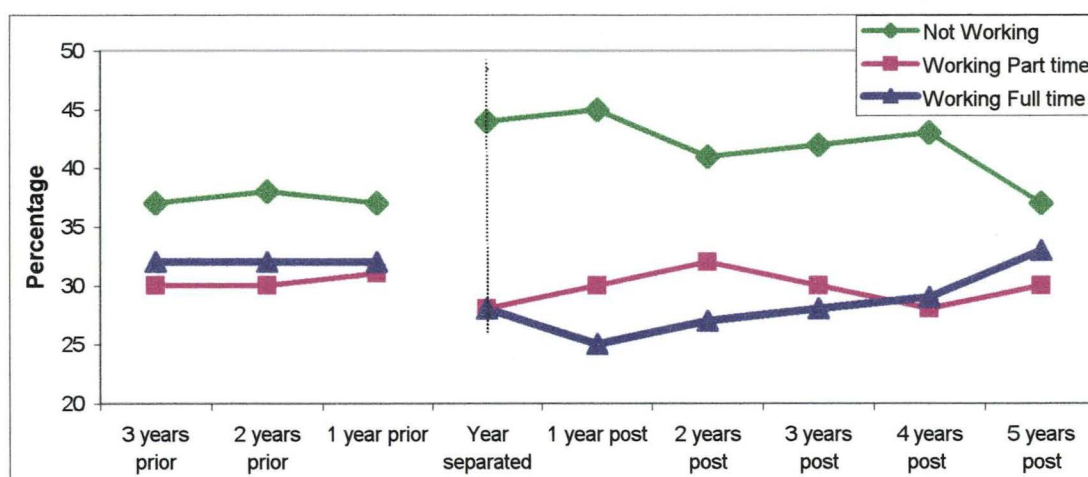
<sup>8</sup> This analysis pertains only to sole mothers who were previously in a registered marriage. Sole mothers not previously in a registered marriage but separated from a *de facto* relationship are not included. However, a similar analysis including this group shows a very similar pattern of post-relationship separation labour market activity.

respondents had separated in the previous six years. Most sole mothers had young children in their care at the time of separation. Just over half of the sample had a child aged less than five years and nearly 90 per cent had a child aged less than 12 years of age when the marriage ended.

The marital separation clearly has an impact on the mothers' labour market participation levels in the base year. As can be seen in Figure 6.1, the proportion not in paid work rises from a consistent 37 or 38 per cent in the three years prior to the end of the marriage, to 45 per cent in the first year after the marriage ended.

Correspondingly, the proportion of mothers in employment reduces from 63 per cent in the year prior to marital breakdown, to around 55 per cent in the year after the separation event. The size of this drop in work reduction rates, although from a higher starting point, is similar to that found in Britain by Jarvis and Jenkins (1998).

**Figure 6.1: Sole Mothers' Work Modes Before and After Marital Separation**



Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The pattern of post-separation participation also varies by work mode. For full-time workers, a participation downturn in the year of separation is followed by a further drop in the first year post-separation. On the other hand, part-time employment rates begin to rise in the first year post-separation from their low in the base year. This suggests that some sole mothers are initially substituting part-time for full-time work in the period immediately after the breakdown of their marriage. By four years post-separation, however, the proportion working full-time again overtakes those in part-time employment. Overall, the mothers' employment modes do not return to a pattern resembling the pre-separation rates until five years after the year of separation.



The duration of this period indicates that the impact of marital separation on labour market activity is not short-term. While the proportion of sole mothers working part- and full-time rises slowly from their post-separation lows, even three years after separation the sole mothers are still not working at the same levels they were in the years before their marriage ended. However, at five years post-separation, around two-thirds of the sole mothers are in the workforce, with 33 per cent working full-time and 30 per cent part-time. Interestingly, the five-year post-separation rates replicate almost exactly current ABS estimates of married mothers' labour force participation rates. Significantly, however, a higher proportion of the sole mothers are working full-time (33 per cent, compared to 26 per cent for married mothers) (ABS 2000a). These results strongly indicate that the family breakdown event is linked to a reduction of labour market activity by a significant proportion of new sole mothers. Yet, while the adjustment time taken in the transition from married to sole mother appears considerable, the mothers do return to the workforce and at employment rates at least as high as those of married mothers. Crucially, these figures do not support a picture of long-term static dependence or lack of work orientation among sole mothers.

#### **6.4.2 Education Level and Age and Number of Children**

Mothers' employment status and mode of work at the time of marital separation varies by the age and number of children and educational level. As can be seen in Table 6.5, mothers with post-school qualifications at the tertiary or skilled vocational level are significantly more likely to be employed in the year of marital separation than those with a secondary schooling or basic vocational education only. This result is in line with that from the previous section where sole mothers with higher educational levels are more likely to hold 'mother/worker' or 'primarily worker' gendered moral rationalities about the compatibility of motherhood and employment.

Half (51 per cent) of the mothers had a pre-school age child in their care at the time of separation, and these mothers were significantly less likely to be employed at the time of the marital separation than those with older children. The full-time work rate for the mothers with a youngest child aged 12–16 years is lower than for those with younger children. However, this discrepancy may be explained by the relatively small number of cases in this category ( $n = 12$ ). The number of children in the family

also has a significant impact: the more children a mother has, the less likely she is to be working in the year her marriage ends. These findings are comparable to those of Funder (1993), where having a school age child and/or a professional occupation was found to be associated with an earlier re-entry into the workforce after divorce.

**Table 6.5: Impact of Children on Mothers' Post-separation Work Mode**

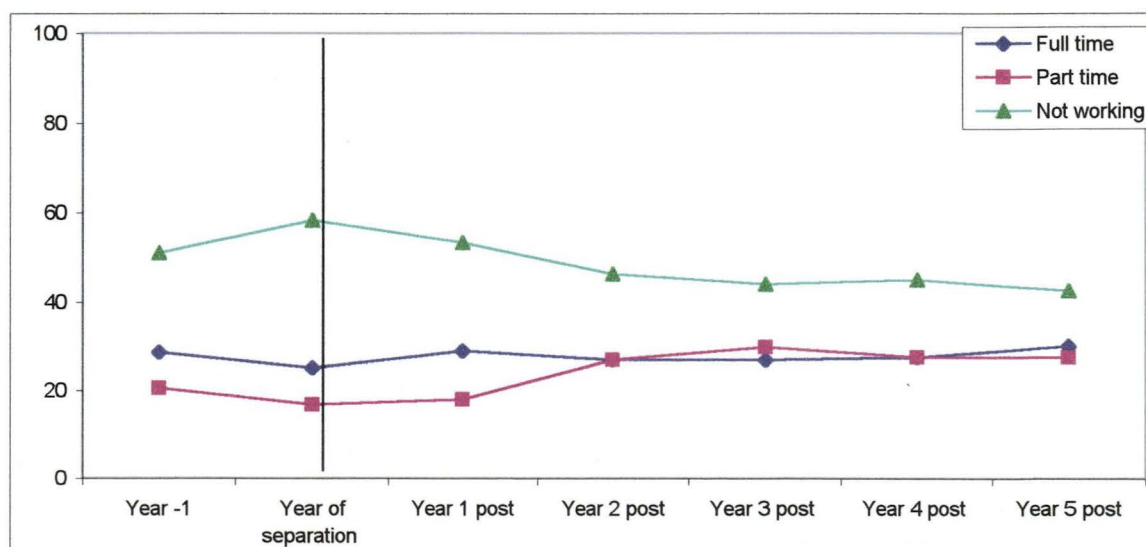
<i>Variable</i>	Work Mode in Year Marriage Separated		
	Not working	Working P/T	Working F/T
<i>Has Post School Qualification*</i>	%	%	%
No	51	24	25
Yes	24	33	42
<i>Age of youngest child*</i>	%	%	%
0 – 4 years	59	20	21
5 – 11 years	31	31	38
12 – 16 years	25	58	17
<i>Number of children *</i>			
One	26	22	52
Two	36	31	33
Three or more	60	28	12

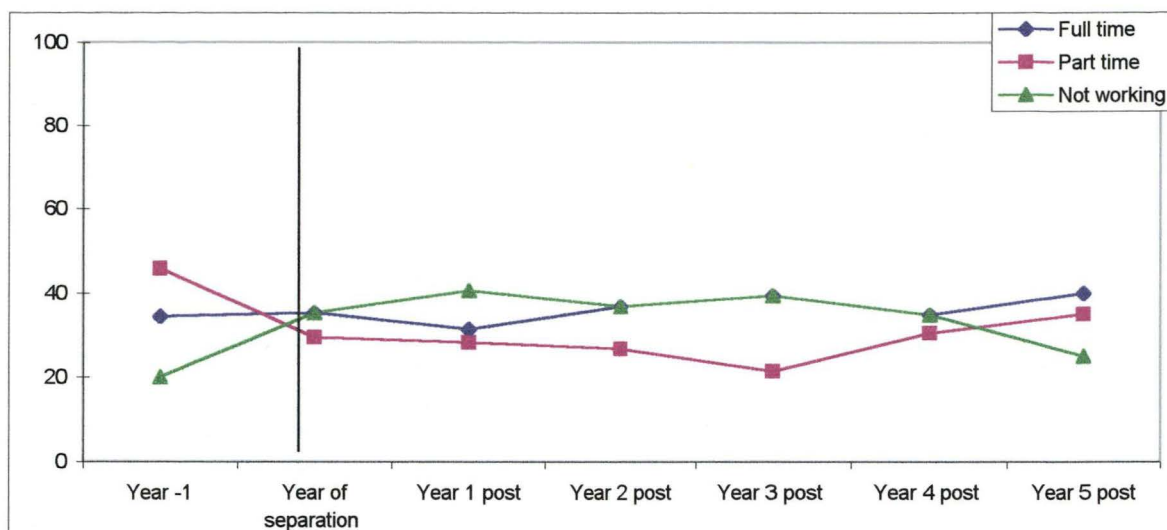
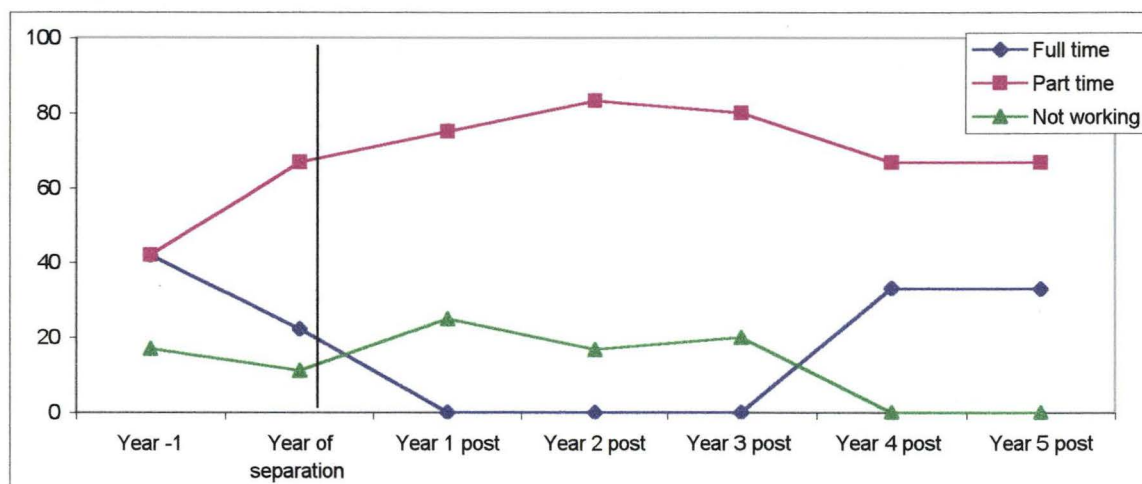
\*Chi square test indicates difference significant at  $p < .05$

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The presence of a young child is also influential in the mother's labour market activity during the two years surrounding the end of the marriage relationship. As can be seen from the series of figures below, the pattern of mothers' workforce behaviour varies according to the age of her youngest child.

**Figure 6.2: Labour Market Activity, Pre- and Post-Separation: Child 0–4 Years**



**Figure 6.3: Labour Market Activity, Pre-and Post-Separation: Child 5–11 Years****Figure 6.4: Labour Market Activity, Pre- and Post-Separation: Child 12–16 Years**

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

For mothers whose youngest child was of pre-school age, the impact of marital separation is reasonably limited. As shown in Figure 6.2, the relatively high proportion of mothers of very young children already out of the labour market might explain this muted impact. The question for this group, therefore, is whether or not the marital separation delayed the mothers' plans to return to the paid workforce? While it is impossible to answer this question from these data, it is reasonable to hypothesise, given the obvious impact of separation on the workforce activity of mothers with older children, that marital separation will also affect the timing of these mothers' return to the labour market.

For mothers whose youngest child was of primary school age at the time of the marital separation, the observable impact of separation on workforce activity is much higher. As shown in Figure 6.3, the proportion of the mothers not in the workforce doubles in the first year post-separation. Work mode is also important. For full-time workers, there is very little change, but the reduction in the proportion of mothers' working part-time is much higher. While 46 per cent of the mothers are working part-time in the year prior to separation, this falls to only 28 per cent in the first year after separation. Further reductions in the part-time work rates in the second and third years after the year of marital separation appear to be related to a take-up of full-time work, rather than further reductions in labour market participation. In the context of gendered moral rationalities, these data make intuitive sense. Those mothers in part-time work are also those most likely to fall into a primarily mother or mother/worker integral categories in their attitudes toward motherhood and paid work. As such, the choice of part-time rather than full-time work during their marriage was likely made because of its fit with their motherhood obligations and aspirations, rather than its career prospects or intrinsic, personal reward. Thus, when these mothers experience marital separation and the personal and family stresses that such an event entails, they are more likely to decide that they need to be mothers, not workers, at least for a period after the marital breakdown.

The impact of marital separation on the workforce activity of those mothers whose youngest child was aged 12–16 years differs again. While the relatively low number of cases in this category ( $n = 12$ ) means the results must be interpreted with some caution, these mothers of older children tended to move from full-time to part-time work after separation, rather than withdraw from the labour market entirely. As shown in Figure 6.3, the numbers in part-time work rose from 42 per cent in the year prior to separation to 67 per cent in the separation year, to a high of 83 per cent in the second post-separation year. Although all the mothers in this category were in the workforce by the fourth year after their marital separation, the proportion working full-time had still not returned to pre-separation figures at the end of five years. This indicates that even with older children sole parenthood has an impact on a mother's ability to participate in the labour market.

## 6.5 Marital Work History and Income Support Receipt

The sole mothers' employment history during the marriage is also a significant predictor of post-separation work activity. As shown in Table 6.6, around half of those employed in the year before the marital separation are also in full-time work in the first year post-separation, compared to only eight per cent of those not working in the final year of their marriage. Of course, the high rates of young children among those not working at the end of their marriage need to be considered here.

**Table 6.6: Marital Work History and Post-separation Work Mode**

Work Mode	One Year Post Marital Separation Year		
	Not Working	Working P/T	Working F/T
<i>One Year Prior to Separation Year*</i>	%	%	%
Full-Time	33	20	47
Part-Time	22	54	24
Not Working	76	16	8

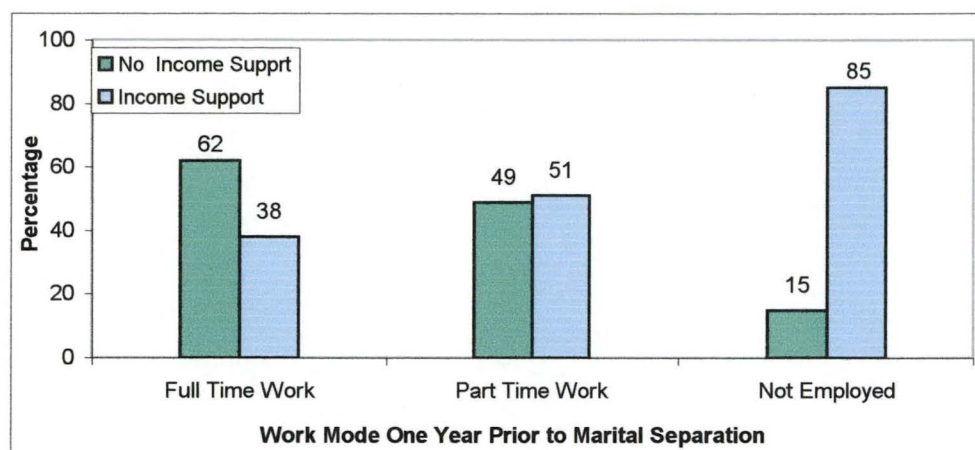
\*Chi square test indicates difference significant at  $p < .05$ .

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The impact of marital separation on labour force activity also varies according to pre-separation work mode. Those in part-time work in the year prior to separation are less likely than those working full-time to have withdrawn completely from the labour market. Further, around a quarter increase their participation from part-time to full-time work. Those not in paid work prior to separation are similarly unlikely to be in work post-separation, although around a quarter have commenced work in some form. These data refer to the first year post-separation, when the part-time employment rate of the mothers has begun to rise. Nevertheless, the pattern of employment participation within the marriage is, arguably, highly influential on the post-separation workforce behaviour of sole mothers.

The effect of marital work history on later levels of income support receipt is even more dramatic. As can be seen in Figure 6.5, there is a strong connection between the marital work mode and sole mothers' later reliance on income support. Employment during marriage is negatively correlated with later income support receipt. Less than 40 per cent of those in full-time employment in the year before their marriage ended were receiving a social security income support payment at the time of the NLC survey. In comparison around 85 per cent of those not working immediately prior to the marital separation are in receipt of income support.



**Figure 6.5: Marital Work History and Current Income Support Receipt**

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

These findings are similar to those of Funder et al. (1993), in that those employed immediately before their marriage ended are more likely to remain in employment and less likely to have a continued reliance on income support payments. Hence, decisions taken by mothers within the marriage about workforce participation appear to set the scene for later employment and income support dependency.

## 6.6 Answering the Question

The analytical focus of this chapter has been following research sub-question.

*Are sole mothers' perspectives on the compatibility of motherhood and labour market participation different to those of married mothers?*

The answer, from the foregoing results, is both no and yes. Both the sole and married mothers, to varying degrees, appear to hold attitudes and values that are consistent with the dominant, conventional orientation toward motherhood and paid work. In essence, the labour market decisions of both sole and married mothers are taken within the ideology of motherhood and are shaped by the mothers' individually held gendered moral rationalities. While the 'rational economic man' desire to maximise financial and personal gain from paid labour is obviously also a consideration, its effect appears to be attenuated, and in some cases subsumed, by the mother's belief system about the compatibility of economic activity and their overarching responsibility to children. For both groups, the ideology and motivations of motherhood appear paramount in the constitution of rational choice around labour market participation. This overall similarity in motherhood orientation between the

married and sole mothers emphasises that motherhood, not sole motherhood, is the defining identity of Australian sole mothers.

Sole mothers are, however, generally more liberal in their orientation to motherhood. The reason for this difference is not easily discernible, but as discussed earlier, the lived experience of sole parenthood may force many women to re-evaluate their belief systems around motherhood. For example, the lack of the ongoing support of a partner, both financially and in day-to-day parenting, as well as the contradictory political and social messages around the appropriate orientation of sole and married mothers to the workforce, may create a cognitive dissonance in sole mothers' ongoing commitment to the primacy of motherhood. However, as the analysis also shows, the practical application of gendered moral rationalities can vary with the particular life circumstances of the mother. For those experiencing the aftermath of relationship breakdown, the construction of rational choice around motherhood and labour market participation may be very different to that decided within the pre-existing two-parent household. Yet these results also indicate that, if anything, sole mothers are more likely than married mothers to view employment and parenting as compatible activities. That they do not participate in the labour market at equal or greater rates than married mothers, points to the more practical aspects of combining work and motherhood being a greater impediment to sole mothers than to married mothers. Thus, the lived experience of being a sole mother appears to mitigate against higher rates of labour market activity. Mandated workforce participation under welfare reform is, therefore, unlikely to solve the 'problem' of low levels of labour market participation among sole mothers.

Moreover, sole mothers' current circumstances are dominated by those of the past. The 'choices' made in the private sphere about the manner in which family and income needs are balanced reverberates into the future of the sole mother household. The consequences of this private motherhood 'price' paid during marriage are not only multiplied at family separation but also become the concern of public policy. Partnered mothers adopting the traditional single income model of the two-parent family, now encouraged in political rhetoric and social policy, and withdrawing from the workforce to care for their families, will pay the highest economic price should their marriages break down. Furthermore, they are the group most likely to be then classified as 'welfare dependent'.

Yet, even for those sole mothers whose gendered moral rationalities mean that their belief systems about good mothering are not compromised by labour market activity, the task of combining those two roles brings its own dilemmas. Congruence of belief systems does not reduce the difficulty of actually trying to combine the emotional and physical task of parenting with the obligations and responsibilities of paid work. Effective parenting and household utility require a substantial input of time as well as income. The difficult task of balancing the requirements of the mother and the worker role faced by all mothers, but sole mothers in particular, is addressed in the next chapter.



## Chapter Seven: Orientation to the Labour Market

*Do the different levels of labour market participation by sole and married mothers represent a different orientation to labour market activity?*

### 7.0 Introduction

In welfare reform's fundamental 'work or welfare' division, the definition of the term 'work' is obviously limited to paid market work. Yet, providing for children is not just about economic provision. Provision of parenting is at least equally important. Nonetheless, the work of parenting, in both econometric analyses of sole mothers' attachment to the labour market and social policy direction, is consistently overlooked. For while sole mothers may be reconstituted as workers within welfare reform discourse, this re-categorisation does not remove their obligation to parent their children. In defining men and women as possessive individuals, 'liberal' welfare regimes view the gendered division of labour into paid and unpaid work as personal choice rather than a concern for the state (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). The raising of children is deemed a private matter, something done for love, by parents, at home. This relegation of family life to the private sphere, however, reduces the conception of parenting to 'caring'. While love is an essential element of good parenting, it does not, in itself, constitute parenting. Rather, parenting work is physical and time consuming, rather than occurring naturally as a biologically determined trait. Additionally, despite the common usage of the term 'parenting' when talking about the tasks of child rearing, it remains mothers who continue to do the vast majority of this work. For sole mothers this parenting work is essentially performed alone. Under welfare reform, the emphasis is on getting these previously 'private' child raisers into the labour market.

How the parenting work needs of sole mother households can be reconciled with the growing imperative for labour market work is unexplained in welfare reform discourse. While sole mother households certainly require income to meet family needs in lieu of that previously provided by a partner, the parental obligations and

duties of sole mothers also remain constant. Maternal employment may generate household income but the performance of labour market activity necessitates a trade-off in family time. This dual need for family income and parenting/household time creates an income/time conundrum. As justification for mandating sole mothers' workforce activity, policy documents use the rising rates of workforce participation of married mothers of dependent children as their prime evidence (Newman 1999). The underlying inference is that the labour market participation disparity between sole and married mothers relates to a weaker work ethic among the sole mothers. In policy terms, sole mothers' lower participation rates are taken as a clear indicator of the need to enforce labour market activity through mutual obligation and breaching provisions, among sole mothers. However, while participation statistics might provide a guide to patterns of employment, they are not, in themselves, explanations for why such patterns exist.

This chapter explores this thesis' second sub-question relating to sole and married mothers' orientation towards the labour market. To answer this question, the chapter begins by exploring the complex, constant and time-consuming nature of parenting work, along with its essential invisibility in social policy. The notion that time allocation is different for sole and partnered mother households is also reviewed through an examination of literature on the topic. Following this, the sole and married mother respondents' levels of work force participation, attitudes and values towards employment, as well as reasons for current level of labour market activity, are compared. These data are examined within the framework of the income/time conundrum detailed earlier in Chapter Four.

## **7.1 Parenting as Work**

While Australian women are now in the labour market in unprecedented numbers, mothers of dependent children still devote a large proportion of their time to family work. Increased market work does not necessarily result in a reduction in time allocated to family labour. Women's new employment role has not altered their pre-existing role of primary carer. Instead, as Baxter (2000) contends, the gendered division of labour within the home 'shows remarkable resilience in the face of dramatic changes in women's level of participation in paid employment (p. 13). The unpaid family workload of mothers also does not appear to have been significantly

reduced by household technology and conveniences such as take-away food. While research indicates that over the last two decades the overall time spent on housework has fallen by about three hours per week, this reduction has been more than replaced by a rise in the time devoted to caring for children by both men and women (Bittman 1995; Baxter 2001; Craig 2002). Women have not abandoned the home to go to work but, instead, now hold an expected labour market participation role in addition to their primary care/domestic responsibilities. The result is a significant time squeeze.

### **7.1.1 The Invisibility of Unpaid Work**

The ABS (1994b) calculates that the value of unpaid work in the Australian economy is equivalent to between 48 and 64 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Or up to three times that of the entire manufacturing industry (1989, p. 2, cited in Bittman 1992). Yet despite the huge quantity of family labour performed daily as unpaid work, these tasks do not count in terms of GDP or national accounts. Indeed, their definition as work at all is marginal at best. In economic terms, family work is deemed as private unpaid work, undertaken privately, in the private sphere. As such, although more latterly recognised by the ABS through time use surveys, caring work remains economically invisible. As Ribbens (1994), argues the social construction of the family as private life, especially in market economies, operates to effectively obscure the amount of effort that goes into its creation. Additionally, the classification of caring work as non-work allows the 'public good' benefits of children to be freely accessed by those who have not contributed to the costs, effectively free riding on the efforts of parents, particularly mothers (Donath 1995; England & Folbre 1999). The incongruity in the economic treatment of unpaid household and family labour can be highlighted by comparing the 'economic value' of the unpaid work of a parent with that of a paid childcare worker. For a mother, staying out of the labour force to care for her own children at home is not classified as work in terms of GDP. However, if the same child is similarly cared for by a non-parent, for pay, then this caring work is counted in the GDP. Perhaps this is 'wealth creation' at its most ridiculous.

Parenting work is, however, much more than childcare or an extension of housework. Although having a dependent child certainly involves a significant increase in direct housework such as washing, cooking and cleaning, the work of parenting

encompasses a different set of tasks entirely, many of which are not easily measured. These can include listening, delivering and collecting children to and from school, sporting and cultural events, teaching manners and eating habits, showing children things, reading and responding to the many school notices, selling raffle tickets, baking cakes for school fetes, monitoring and supervision of homework or visits by friends, emptying school bags, monitoring and adjudicating on TV programs and watching times, bed times, bathing, room cleaning and help with household tasks, hugging and kissing, spending quality time together, answering questions and keeping children amused. And the list goes on. Because such work is so integral to being a parent and is mostly undertaken in a fragmentary manner, it tends not to be seen as work at all. It remains invisible and 'just part of being a parent', varying throughout the life course and according to the age of the child being parented. However, while much of this work is achieved while also completing more easily recorded tasks, such as cooking meals or cleaning floors, it is still complex, labourious and intensive work in itself. For example, Folbre (1994) maintains that talking and listening to children are activities that might superficially seem to qualify as leisure, but are actually often responsibilities that require a concerted effort.

Parenting work also contains a substantial, but often invisible, managerial and organisational element. Activities such as negotiating between warring siblings, thinking out and arranging childcare or making sure there are enough \$2 coins in the purse to pay school bus fares, are all a daily part of parenting work. Daly (2000) dubs this mental activity as 'responsibility work' or the organisational work of meeting all the temporal demands of the family. Such work, he notes, involves an ongoing vigilance as to what needs to be done, a series of mental preparations to ensure that lists are made and calls are completed and directions and supervision given to other family members to ensure that vital family activities are conducted in a timely manner. Mothers, Daly maintains, are the chief administrative officers in families and the core planners. They hold the managerial role and responsibilities for making sure that all the things that need to happen, do indeed happen.

While attempts have been made to improve the research measurement of unpaid household work, the fragmentary nature of parenting and the difficulty in quantifiably measuring such activity, mean that even with a broad definition of household labour, the scope of such studies to capture parenting work is

questionable. The most recent Australian Time Use Survey (ABS 1997c) attempts a quite comprehensive list of domestic activity and includes tasks such as budgeting and organising rosters, plus the physical and emotional care of children such as hugging, teaching, helping or reprimanding children, playing, reading and talking with the children and associated communication and travel. Respondents are also asked to record both primary and secondary activities. However, even with such a wide definition, the necessity of sorting tasks into exclusive categories such as labour market work, household work and leisure or personal time operates to mask much unpaid work. For example, Bittman (1995) cites the ABS in conceding that, if overlapping childcare activity was fully included, then time use estimates of childcare would likely rise by 300 per cent. The omission of multiple overlapping activities, is also likely to seriously underestimate a mother's non-market production. Multi-tasking – that is, intensive and multiple task activity – is emerging as a feature of family/parenting work, especially as a coping strategy among women workers. Floro and Miles' (2001) Australian study confirms that being female significantly increased overlapping work activity. Thus, although household labour and childcare activity may be included in surveys of unpaid household work, less measurable activities of parenting work such as emotional and responsibility work are likely to be ignored or seriously underestimated. This underestimation appears obvious in the low time allocations for parenting type work calculated in much time use research. For example, in Bittman and Goodin's (1998) equivalence scale for time, the formula for a woman's unpaid work time includes just 11 hours extra per week for dependent children. That is, a woman can expect her total unpaid family workload to only increase by an additional 1.6 hours per day when she has children! For the vast majority of mothers, sole and partnered, such a formulation is likely to bear little relationship to their daily reality.

### **7.1.2 Emotionalisation of Parenting**

Yet while the daily activities included in parenting are clearly based on labour, the classification of parenting as nurturing and loving tends to strip away its status as work. Just as Oakley (1974) noted that the manual labour of housework is effectively made invisible through its definition as natural expression of women's loving and caring, so the work of parenting is similarly emotionalised. This emotionalisation is illustrated in the way the work of parenting is commonly depicted. For example

*Parentwork*, an online parenting magazine for working families, describes parenting work as ‘gently helping our children grow while providing for our families’ (Parentwork 2001). While such a portrayal captures the caring element of parenting, it ignores completely the ongoing, constant, physical and emotional demands of parent work. The description implies a soft, warm, enveloping formless sort of assistance. However, as most primary carers will affirm, ‘gently helping our children to grow’ is not what parenting feels like on a day-to-day basis!

While parenting work does indeed involve loving and nurturing care, loving and nurturing are not just emotional states. Cuddling a child, reading bedtime stories or attempting to engage taciturn adolescents in conversation all require purposeful, time-consuming, mostly non-optional, unpaid and frequently physically tiring activity. While a small proportion of the population may reduce parenting work by outsourcing it to a boarding school or by employing a nanny, for the vast majority this is not an option. Even the use of paid childcare services, while effectively outsourcing some of the time requirements for parenting, does not significantly reduce overall parenting work. Children are supervised, fed and kept active in childcare centres, but they are not parented. From the perspective of parenting, then, the term ‘family’ should be considered a verb not a noun (Smart 1999). Family is about doing, and doing takes both effort and time – it is work. Active parenting, as an integral part of doing family, is real work that takes real time, and while the amount of effort expended varies from parent to parent, it forms a non-voluntary component of having children. It is also a consistent workload. A lack of parenting work for anything but the shortest period quickly becomes obvious, and family functioning suffers (Crittendon 2000).

## **7.2 Parenting, Sole Mothers and Labour Market Work**

For sole mothers, this responsibility for parenting and household work is further compounded by the lack of a resident male partner. While marital or relationship breakdown effectively removes one parent from the household, it does not remove one half of the parenting work. Even if the sole mother was always the primary carer, the loss of the other parent’s input still effectively raises the parenting workload of the sole resident parent. Other ‘non-resident’ parent work may also be added. Negotiating access and visiting times, transporting children to the other parent’s

home and packing and unpacking for children's overnight stays are examples. Because the day is a finite 24 hours, if the unpaid work associated with parenting and home-making rises, it then makes sense to assume that other activities must be reduced to accommodate this increase. While time to be involved in the nurture, care, support and development of children is a compelling issue for all families (Cass 2002), such parenting work, let alone the additional parenting work incumbent on sole mothers, seems unconsidered in the labour market focus of sole parent policy. While family policy focuses on the care aspects of children's welfare, as Uttley (2000) contends, the articulation of the needs of children is conspicuously absent from the debate on sole parents except in purely economic terms.

Research aimed at finding ways of increasing sole parents' labour market attachment tends to reflect this approach. Such research often finds, as if a surprise, that the sole parenting of children is an impediment to labour market work. For example, British social policy researcher Ford (1998) records that: 'Such patterns, observed persistently in surveys of lone mothers, offer evidence that the presence of young children acts as a constraint on participation' (p. 209). This 'finding', while well meant, seems ridiculous when observed from any perspective that includes a consideration of parenting as work, albeit unpaid and undervalued. Where the clash of roles is considered, the impact of parenting work is often deemed a side issue. For example, Bradshaw et al. (1996, p. 9) write: 'While paid work is the best route out of poverty for lone mothers, there may be times when it is in the interests of the children, the community and the lone mother herself for her to stay at home'. Under Australian welfare reform, the responsibilities and work of bringing up children alone have been similarly cast as simply another labour force barrier to be overcome. In the Minister's welfare reform discussion paper, sole parenting work is reduced to just a part of the life course. The paper notes in part:

But bringing up children is only part of a lifetime. Parenting Payment cannot last forever... as children grow up, parenting responsibilities change, and it becomes easier to combine paid work and family life (Newman 1999, p. 20).

The implicit assumption here is that once children are past the infant stage or at school, then parenting is no longer a justifiable excuse not to participate in the labour market. However, the euphemistic use of the term 'family life' to describe the parenting and household labour associated with raising children alone operates to

significantly underplay the work requirements of being a single mother. There is an inherent interrelationship between time use in market work and family work. As both activities are necessary for household utility, a change in the time allocation for one activity will likely result in changes to the other. When mothers work, they lose time with children but theoretically gain income. If they substitute employment with income support, they gain time with children, but presumably have less income. Yet, all work that happens inside the household is real and necessary labour and fundamental to household and family well-being. The underlying decision-making processes faced by mothers around market work will, therefore, likely reflect the inter-dependence of time allocation decisions. Thus household material well-being needs to be evaluated against a two-dimensional index of time and money. Households can be time poor as well as income poor (Vickery 1977; Becker 1981). More importantly, the number of adults in a household has an impact on the interaction between the households' need for paid and unpaid work. While all households face an on-going time/income trade-off, the income/time conundrum is particularly salient to households where only one parent must contribute the majority of both time and income.

### **7.2.1 The Paid Work and Sole Parenting Juggle**

Research in Australia and overseas consistently identifies the time constraints of combining market and family work for sole parents. For example, Ford (1998) finds parenting and household time needs are major considerations in how British sole mothers reach decisions about paid work. No matter what the actual labour market participation status of the sole mother is, he reports, the constantly recurring image is a delicate balance between the demands of family and labour market and the mother's responsibilities to each. In the United States, where welfare reform now mandates workforce activity, the incompatibility of the dual roles for many sole mothers is also clearly identified. Research finds that many sole mothers often express distress that their work obligations are crippling their ability to provide adequate care for their children (Harris 1996; Sequino 1998; Harris & Edin 2000). Stress and exhaustion from trying to adequately fulfil both roles are also continually identified and the precariousness of the balance between work and family clearly articulated. Respondents in one study (DeBord, Canu & Kerpelman 2000) point out that it takes just one small problem, such as the car breaking down, for everything to



collapse into an unworkable heap. Such stress may also lead to physical ill-health. A recent large-scale British study of sole and married mothers with pre-school age children found that while sole mothers had generally poorer health than married mothers, illness was even more commonly reported among those sole mothers in the workforce (Baker & North 1999).

These findings are consistent with Australian qualitative data. Studies from the Brotherhood of St Laurence (1999) and Siemon (1999) find that sole parents face additional time, income costs and pressures compared to two parent families precisely because there is only 'one pair of hands'. Similarly, an Australia-wide focus group study by Swinbourne et al. (2000) identified the high time cost of labour market activity as problematic. Many participants maintained that they had tried working full-time but had been forced by the unsustainable pressure of managing work and family responsibilities to cut back or severely curtail their own lives to keep going. But even decisions to leave the workforce were difficult. As one focus group participant from the study by Swinbourne et al. (2000) said:

But it's trading that stress of having full time work and juggling responsibilities, with now the stress of no money and having the time to do things... (p. 33).

Statistical data also support the idea that sole parents face a time squeeze. The 1994(b) ABS family survey found that sole parents with children aged under 12 years were nearly twice as likely to report difficulty in managing work and care of children as parents in couple families. The increasing imperative and expectation of labour market participation for sole mothers can only exacerbate this difficulty.

On the income side, while sole parent families, compared to couple families, face reduced income-earning capacity, the cost of raising children is not similarly reduced. Whiteford (1991) found that sole parents incur costs and limitations not faced by two parent families, identifying housing and childcare costs as areas of particular difficulty. Housing costs remain similar despite the presence of only one parent, and childcare costs rise because another parent is not available to share the care of children. Indeed, overall, it appears that the costs of children and the amount spent on children remain about the same, regardless of how many parents are present in the household. A British study (Middleton & Ashworth 1998) into the costs of

children found that children in sole parent families receive on average only slightly less spending than children in two-parent families.

### **7.2.2 Sole Mother Households and Economic Strategies**

To negotiate around the income/time conundrum, sole mothers often develop specific economic strategies, or what Harris and Edin (2000) refer to as 'income packaging'. This involves sole mothers, in an effort to maintain some sort of balance between their family's time and income needs, moving between, or combining, paid work and other income-generating strategies including income support payments. The particular economic strategy selected tends to be based around the mother's cost-benefit analysis of the most appropriate trade-off in their parenting and family obligations with their role of economic provider. The choice of strategy is not static but varies over time with the dynamics of changing life circumstances. On the income side, women's expected wage rate, itself a product at least in part of human capital investments in education and training, must be weighed against childcare needs and costs and local labour market conditions. On the parenting side, age, health and number of children, along with other factors such as the recency of family separation, must be considered. Thus, sole mothers may re-evaluate their options as their circumstances change and choose different combinations of options over time, particularly over the mother and child's life course. Younger children may require more time but less income. Older children may require less time, but need more income. As Harris, Guo and Marmer (2000) state, 'women re-evaluate their options as things change and may choose different options over time' (p. 11).

### **7.2.3 Time Allocation: Sole and Married Mothers**

The idea that time allocation decisions in sole parent households are different to those in two parent households has been tested periodically, with inconsistent results. For example, studies have variously found that: sole parent families suffer a greater time squeeze (Rowlands, Nickols & Dodder 1986); there is no major difference in the time allocated to household work between sole and two parent households (Dismukes & Abdel-Ghany 1988); overall, sole mothers do less housework because the reduction of work that occurs when a male partner leaves outweighs his contribution of human resources to household work (Mauldin & Meeks 1990;

Bittman 1992) ). More recently, using data from the ABS 1992 Time Use Survey, Goodin et al. (2002) find that sole mothers households have the least discretionary time of all household types. In that study, married women with no children, in single income households, are estimated to have nearly 95 hours per week discretionary time compared to 76 hours for married women with children in one earner families. Sole mothers, in contrast, have only 61 hours of discretionary time per week, leading to authors note that 'it is only lone mothers who are remarkably short of 'discretionary time' (p. 28). Additionally, although time use studies are now conducted regularly by the ABS, from a between-households perspective, these data are subject to significant limitations. For example, the ABS (1997d) Time Use Survey differentiated partnered women with dependent children from those without, but grouped sole mothers with dependent and non-dependent children in the one category. Other Australian analyses of these data tend to either not include sole mothers at all (see Craig 2002a, 2002b), or count male and female sole parents in the same category (see Bittman 1992). While these categorisations are no doubt undertaken to increase sample size, they greatly reduce the validity of any direct comparison of parenting work between sole and married mother households.

While no firm conclusions can be reached from these data, it makes intuitive sense that sole mothers, by virtue of their soleness, have a greater call on their time for unpaid household and parenting work. The amount of parenting work undertaken is not reduced when the children's father is no longer resident. Indeed there is considerable evidence to suggest that, at least in the first few years, children require extra parenting work to cope with the consequences of family breakdown (Bittman 1992; Swinbourne et al. 2000). Nor can it be assumed that the father's input is simply bundled up and delivered, in bulk, on access visits. Parenting is not something that can be stored. The interpretation of data that indicate a lower unpaid workload for sole mothers may also be turned around. Given that there are only 24 hours in a day, less time spent by sole mothers in home-based work might be a reflection of the time squeeze faced by sole mothers rather than an indication that sole mothers work less than married mothers. For example, Crittendon (2000, p. 23) cites a University of Michigan study that found the children of sole mothers spent 12 to 14 fewer hours per week with parents than children living with a married couple. The reason for this was not parental disinterest. Rather, the limit of 168 hour per week available to sole mothers, as opposed to 336 hours available in two parent households, for all family,

market and personal time, could not accommodate any greater allocation of parental time.

The assumed hierarchy of work choice inherent in such studies is also salient. Mauldin and Meeks (1990) point out that most examinations assume that the time allocated to household and leisure activities is made *after* time is allocated to market work. That is, the allocation to paid work has primacy and other obligations are met from residual time. While this assumption may be valid for the possessive individual of economic theory, it will not fit the lived experience of mothers, sole or partnered. Instead mothers' decisions on time allocated to market, household or parenting work, and maybe even leisure, are likely to be continually changing in an attempt to simultaneously meet household demands for time and income resources. As demonstrated by Becker's (1981) household production model, there is a clear conceptual interrelationship between time spent in market work and family work.

### 7.3 Comparing Labour Market Orientation

Thus, while the primacy of the market is a hallmark of 'liberal' regimes, reliance on the labour market 'does not take place independently of relations and caring within households' (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999, p. 66). Rather, the two are intermixed and, for mothers, decisions about labour market participation must be taken within a framework of parenting and household obligations. Yet, while the need for a reduction of labour market activity to accommodate family and parenting needs is the active subject of social policy directed at two parent households, for sole mother households the social policy direction is firmly focused towards labour market solutions. Moreover, the higher labour market participation rates of married mothers form a major part of the welfare reform rationale to mandate labour market activity for sole parents via mutual obligation and breaching provisions. But do these different levels of workforce participation reflect a different orientation towards labour market participation between sole and married mothers? Are sole mothers' attitudes and values towards paid employment different to those of married mothers? And, if so, does the parenting context in which they are made – that is, being a sole or a married mother – influence the experience of coordinating the dual roles of being both a mother and a market employee? In particular, does the income/time

conundrum faced by all mothers impact more severely on sole mother households? These considerations are the subject of the following analysis.

To address these questions, this section uses the NLC data collected on how the respondents negotiate the pathway through their work and family lives. The details of the sole and married mothers' past and current employment experiences, as well as the attitudes, values and expectations of respondents around paid work, are compared and contrasted. Within this, data on the current labour force status, related issues such as use and problems associated with childcare, job aspirations, position conditions and descriptions, as well as the reasons nominated by the sole and married mothers for their current level of labour market participation, are explored and analysed. Unfortunately, the NLC data does not allow a comparison of the time spent on household and parenting work by sole and married mothers. While questions relating to time spent on caring for children and household tasks were included in the NLC survey, answers to these questions were only sought from partnered mothers. This limitation has been addressed in later waves of the survey.

### 7.3.1 Labour Market Participation of Sole and Married Mothers

The general pattern of labour market participation among the sole and married mother respondents is consistent with ABS (2000a) labour market participation data, as described earlier in Chapter Two. As shown in Table 7.1, the sole mothers are less likely to be in paid work than the married mothers and more likely to be actively seeking employment. Among those in employment, the sole mothers have roughly similar rates of full-time work, but lower rates of part-time employment.

**Table 7.1: Labour Market Participation Rates – Sole and Married Mothers**

Employment Variable	Sole Mothers %	Married Mothers %
<i>Employment Status in Previous Week</i>		
Yes – in employment	60	64
No – actively looking for work	10	3
No – not actively looking for work	30	33
<i>Mode of work</i>		
Not in employment	40	36
Part-time work (< 35 hours pw.)	35	41
Full-time work (≥35 hours pw)	25	23
N	144	441

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97

The overall labour market participation rate, that is, the percentage of those currently in employment and/or seeking work reported here, is higher than current ABS estimates for both sole and married mothers, but especially so for the sole mothers. This disparity is common in non-government sample surveys (see Evans 2000). Reasons suggested for the discrepancy include the notion that non-government surveys may contain better reporting of informal economic activity or, alternatively, that the ABS has greater success in reaching persons whose marginal capacity to cope makes them both less likely to work and prohibitively more expensive for non-government surveys to contact. The implication for this thesis is that employed sole mother respondents may be over-represented in this sample. While this over-representation is unlikely to significantly affect the analyses, it should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. Within the sole mothers' group, the percentages in the labour force are similar. Despite having younger children, 59 per cent of the never-married sole mothers ( $n = 19$ ), compared to 61 per cent of the previously-married sole mothers ( $n = 68$ ), report labour market activity.

### 7.3.2 Labour Market Participation and Children

The age and number of children have a significant impact on mothers' workforce activity. As shown in Table 7.2, while all mothers with younger children display a reduced employment rate, the effect is more marked for the sole mothers.

**Table 7.2: Mothers' Employment Mode by Age and Number of Children**

	Not employed %	Part-time work %	Full-time Work %	N
<i>Has a preschool age child (a)</i>				
Sole Mother	54	36	10	33
Married Mother	48	37	15	213
<i>Has a primary age child (b)</i>				
Sole Mother	44	35	21	89
Married Mother	38	39	23	265
<i>Has no primary or preschool age child (c)</i>				
Sole Mother	32	25	43	40
Married Mother	28	38	34	74

(a) (b) The figures are based on a sample restricted to respondents with dependent children in the nominated age group.

(c) The figures are based on a sample restricted to those respondents with no preschool or primary-aged child

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The effect persists for mothers of primary school aged children with fewer sole mothers working even part-time than the married mothers. However, in line with

other Australian data (see McHugh & Millar 1996; Gray et al. 2002) the effect is reversed with older children. Although part-time work rates are still lower, more sole mothers than married mothers of children aged over primary school age are working full-time. Thus, it appears that when the employment restrictions associated with having the caring responsibilities of young children ease for the sole mothers, they select a more active involvement in the labour market than do the married mothers.

## **7.4 Employment Circumstances**

Given that the sole mother respondents are less likely to be in any paid work, less likely to be in part-time work and more likely to be unemployed, are the types of job undertaken by sole and married mothers different? The NLC data contain details of the description, benefits and requirements of respondents' employment situation and these are analysed below. As only those working at the time of the survey answered these questions, unless otherwise stated the percentages reported refer to the subgroup of employed mothers ( $n = 369$ ), rather than the entire sample.

### **7.4.1 Employment Description**

Despite the previously reported differences in employment rates and modes, the job types, status and circumstances of the working sole and married mothers are quite similar. As can be seen in Table 7.3, the majority of each group see themselves as in permanent positions, with only a third of each group reporting being a casual employee. In line with the educational level data, however, higher proportions of married mothers report managerial or professional occupations, while the sole mothers are over-represented in the labourer and related workers' category. This division is also reflected in the level of education needed for their respective jobs, with the sole mothers more likely to report that their employment requires only an incomplete secondary education. The married mothers are more likely to be self-employed, but this difference is perhaps linked to the greater likelihood of family partnership businesses among married mothers. Further analyses of these data within the sole mothers' group found no statistically significant differences.

**Table 7.3: Employment Description–Sole and Married Mothers**

<b>Job Description Variable</b>	<b>Sole Mothers %</b>	<b>Married Mothers %</b>
<i>Employer Type</i>		
Private Company or Non-Government Organisation	60	49
Government Department or Agency	29	32
Self Employed	11	19
<i>Employment Status</i>		
Permanent Employee	60	64
Casual Employee	33	32
Contract	7	4
<i>Occupation Type</i>		
Managers/Administrators/Professionals	28	33
Associate Professionals	10	13
Tradespersons and related workers	5	2
Advanced clerical, sales and service workers	9	7
Intermediary clerical, sales and service workers	25	30
Intermediate production and transport workers	1	2
Elementary clerical, sales and service workers	5	7
Labourers and related workers	16	3
Not fully specified	0	2
<i>How much education required?</i>		
Less than completed secondary school	40	30
Completed secondary school	17	24
Post school certificate or diploma	17	19
Degree from a university	26	27
N	87	282

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

#### **7.4.2 Employment Conditions and Requirements**

The employment related benefits available to the employed sole and married mothers are also very similar. As shown in Table 7.4, a slight majority of each group report being able to access paid sick, recreation leave and long service leave. While only about 30 per cent of each group report access to paid maternity leave, most of the remainder can access unpaid maternity leave. Interestingly, these data also indicate that over 40 per cent of each group meet the ABS (1999a) definition of a casual worker, that is an employee who receives neither paid sick leave nor paid holiday leave. This percentage is considerably higher than the 32 per cent of the female workforce estimated by the ABS (1999a) to be in casual employment, indicating that working mothers, whether sole and married, are significantly more likely than women without dependent children to hold casual positions. This is also 10



percentage points higher than the casual employment rate self-reported by mothers in the previous table. Given this anomaly, it seems likely that the later figure is the more accurate, with the previous data reflecting the mothers' impression of their jobs' permanence rather than their actual labour force status.

**Table 7.4: Employment Conditions – Sole and Married Mothers**

<b>Employment Condition Variable</b>	<b>Paid Sick Leave</b>	<b>Paid Holiday Leave</b>	<b>Long Service Leave</b>	<b>Paid Maternity Leave</b>	<b>Unpaid Maternity Leave</b>	<b>Family/Carers Leave</b>
<i>Sole Mother % (n = 87)</i>	54	54	51	30	65	37
<i>Married Mother % (n = 280)</i>	57	58	53	31	62	40

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The work requirements of the jobs held by the sole and married mothers are also analogous, as Table 7.5 shows. The majority of both groups are employed in jobs that rarely, or never, require them to work overtime or long, broken shifts or irregular hours, or work at night, or take work home, or be required to travel away from their home overnight. The only difference of note is the higher proportion of sole mothers who often work weekends. This difference may reflect the higher proportion of sole mothers in lower level positions. Alternatively, perhaps children's access visits with non-resident parents make weekend work more suitable for sole mothers.

**Table 7.5: Job Requirements – Sole and Married Mothers**

<b>Job Requirement Variable</b>	<b>Broken shifts/irregular hours</b>	<b>Overtime/long shifts</b>	<b>Week-end work</b>	<b>Night work</b>	<b>Take work home</b>	<b>Travel o/night</b>
<i>Sole Mother (n = 87)</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Often	25	17	33	24	21	2
Sometimes	13	20	11	14	13	14
Rarely or Never	62	63	55	61	66	84
<i>Married Mothers (n = 280)</i>						
Often	27	18	26	24	24	4
Sometimes	13	25	15	16	16	11
Rarely or Never	60	57	59	60	60	85

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

From these employment-related data it can be seen that the vast majority of employed sole and married mothers tend to hold jobs that do not require long periods away from the home and thus the clash between their labour market and mothering roles is limited. While not explicitly detailed in the data, it might be surmised that

these jobs are selected by the sole and married mothers (or others not selected) precisely because of their mothering-work friendly nature.

## 7.5 Labour Market Constraints

The analysis of the employment data to date allows the construction of a picture of the sole and married mothers' working circumstances. However, they do not offer any explanation for the differences in the labour market participation rates of the two groups of mothers. This issue is addressed, in part, by the data from the NLC survey that details the reasons given by the respondents for their current level of labour market activity. To the question 'Why aren't you in paid work at present?' respondents gave answers in their own words (as many answers as they wished), which were then allocated by the interviewer to pre-codes on the questionnaire (listed in Table 7.6). Answers not fitting a pre-code were coded as 'other'. As can be seen in Table 7.6, the reasons given by the groups of mothers for not being in the workforce are significantly different.

**Table 7.6: Reasons Not Currently Employed - Sole and Married Mothers**

Why Aren't You in Paid Work at Present?*	Sole Mother %	Married Mother %
Prefer to be home with children	31	73
Have problems with childcare	9	1
Do not need the additional income	3	4
Cannot find a job with suitable hours	0	1
Cannot find a job suitable to skills	3	2
Cannot find work nearby	2	1
Cannot find any work at all	9	0
Studying	10	5
Other	33	13
N	57	157

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mother respondents significant at  $p < .05$

The figures for reasons not currently employed are based on a sample restricted to those respondents who were not in employment at the time of the survey. Response rates relate to the first response given, although some respondents provided a second response to this question.

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Although nearly three-quarters of the married mothers say they prefer to be home with children, only 30 per cent of sole mothers give this response. Additionally, for around a quarter of the sole mothers, not working is linked primarily to employment difficulties, such as childcare problems, rather than an active choice to stay out of the labour market. While the overall younger age of married mothers' children is, no doubt, a factor in these differences, these data also suggest other explanations: first,

that paid work is more of an imperative for the sole mothers and, second, that the married mothers hold a greater capacity to actively choose their mothering role over employment.

A significant proportion of the mothers gave non-categorised reasons for their current non-participation in the labour market. An analysis of the text records of these data reveal some patterns (data not shown). For half of the sole mothers, and one-quarter of the married mothers in the 'other' category, health, either their own or that of a child or a spouse, is the major impediment to employment. A further 40 per cent of these sole mothers nominate reasons related to the difficulty of managing home and work, or a belief that they are too old to re-enter the workforce compared to 20 per cent of the 'other' married mothers with similar responses. Among married mothers, the next most common theme relates to a choice to stay out of the workforce. One-quarter state that they either do not want to work or do not consider paid work appropriate for a woman with children. Only one sole mother expressed a similar view<sup>9</sup>.

Those respondents in employment, but not currently working full-time, were also asked 'Why didn't you work full-time, that is 35 hours a week or more?.' As shown in Table 7.7, roughly half of the sole and the married mothers say that they work less than full-time because they prefer to spend more time with their children. However, the higher proportion of sole mothers stating that they cannot get full-time work indicates that, while part-time work is an active choice for a majority, accessing full-time market work is more difficult for sole mothers. This assumption is corroborated by the respondents' satisfaction with current work hours. While around a quarter of each group want to work less, a greater proportion of the married mothers are happy with their current hours and the sole mothers are significantly more likely to see themselves as under-employed.

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<sup>9</sup> Unable to report numbers of respondents as, first and second responses were amalgamated in 'other' text variable.

**Table 7.7: Explaining Work Hours - Sole and Married Mothers**

	<b>Sole Mothers (n = 51) %</b>	<b>Married Mothers (n = 180) %</b>
<i>Reason Not Working Full-Time (a)</i>		
Prefer to spend more time with children	49	53
Need time to look after house and family	8	10
Cannot get full-time work	14	4
Have problems getting childcare	2	1
Prefer to have more time for self	0	3
Usually do work 35 hours or more	2	2
Earn the income with present hours	0	1
Caring for elderly or sick relative	0	1
Health is not good	0	1
Studying or on a training course	2	1
Full-time work would cause too much stress	0	1
Full-time hours less than 35 hours per week	2	1
Other	21	19
<i>Satisfaction with Current Work Hours (b)*</i>		
	(n = 86)	(n = 279)
Happy with current hours	50	63
Want more hours	23	10
Want less hours	27	27

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mothers significant at  $p < .05$ .

(a) These figures are based on a sample restricted to respondents who were working less than 35 hours per week.

(b) Figures relate to all employed respondents.

Response rates relate to the first response given. Some respondents provided a second response to this question.

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

## 7.6 Childcare

For mothers with younger children, paid employment usually means accessing childcare services during the hours that they are away from the household. Childcare comes in a variety of forms, encompassing formal arrangements such as those provided in daycare centres, after school hours care and family day care services, plus informal childcare often provided by family members, friends or neighbours. While formal childcare usually has a cost attached to its services, informal care may or may not require payment. Analysis of the NLC data finds that just over half of the sole mothers ( $n = 77$ ) and nearly three-quarters of the married ( $n = 325$ ) mothers report using some form of childcare while they and/or their partner are working. The higher childcare usage by the married mothers has two likely explanations. First, a higher percentage of married mothers have younger children. Second, the number of married mothers reporting childcare use ( $n = 325$ ) is higher than that reporting current employment ( $n = 282$ ). Part of the married mothers' data, therefore, must relate to childcare used when their partner is working, rather than themselves.

Therefore, for the following analysis, the sample of married mothers is restricted to those who also report being currently in the labour market.

The majority of the childcare accessed by both groups of mothers is informal, unpaid care. Around 66 per cent of the working sole mothers and 59 per cent of the employed married mothers who use childcare report that they pay nothing for their childcare. Of those with childcare costs, the married mothers pay a higher weekly median (\$40.50) than do the sole mothers (\$35.00). Married mothers' higher average number of children at least partly explains this statistic, with the median weekly cost per pre-school child being \$25.00 for both groups. As can be seen in Table 7.8, the type of pre-school childcare used by sole and married mothers is similar, with over three-quarters of both groups using either family-provided or formal childcare in roughly equal proportions. Usage of school holiday care (not shown here) is also similar. Roughly, 80 per cent of each group report that either they themselves, or a relative who lives elsewhere, care for children during school holidays

**Table 7.8 Childcare Arrangements—Sole and Married Mothers**

Childcare Type Arrangement	Pre-school care %		Primary care %		Sick childcare %	
	<i>Sole Mother</i>	<i>Married Mother</i>	<i>Sole Mother</i>	<i>Married Mother</i>	<i>Sole Mother</i>	<i>Married Mother</i>
Me < or my partner>	19	25	39	59	na	na
Me#	na	na	na	na	46	52
My partner or child's other parent#	na	na	na	na	5	21
A relative who lives with us	5	4	8	7	2	2
A relative who lives elsewhere	19	25	26	10	37	17
A friend or neighbour	0	9	8	8	3	5
A paid sitter or nanny	9	5	3	3	1	1
Family daycare	14	13	2	.5	1	0
Daycare centre at work	5	3	0	0	0	0
Private or community daycare	19	15	2	.5	3	0
Other	9	4	2	1	2	1
Out of school hours care	na	na	10	10	na	.5

# Separate categories for 'me' and 'my partner' or 'child's other parent' were only delineated in Q185 relating to childcare for sick children. Data relating to childcare for preschool and primary age children for 'me < or my partner>' was included in the same category.

A minority of respondents nominated a second form of childcare. Figures reported here are a combination of all data relating to types of childcare utilised by mothers.

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The pattern for after school hours care, or care for sick children is, however, significantly different. In both these situations, sole mothers access higher rates of

relative-provided childcare or formal childcare services and lower rates of within-household care than do married mothers. This reduced access to in-house childcare appears related to the lack of the resident parent. This is especially so in relation to childcare for sick children, where respondents differentiate between care provided by themselves and their partner, or the child's other parent. While 21 per cent of the childcare utilised in married mother households comes from the father, only 5 per cent of care used by sole mothers falls into this category. Non-resident parents, it seems, may continue to parent their children, but, in most cases, this does not translate into physical childcare. This deficit results in a substantial increase in parenting work for employed sole mothers. Thus, for unplanned childcare needs such as when children are sick, or for more difficult-to-access care, such as after school hours, sole mothers need to make different, and probably substantially more complex, arrangements. These findings reflect those for the United Kingdom where informal, out-of-home childcare is most commonly used by sole mothers (Bradshaw & Millar 1991; Ford 1998).

Perhaps because more sole than married mothers need to access out-of-household care, they are also significantly more likely to report childcare problems than the married mothers. As shown in Table 7.9, the cost and difficulty of providing suitable care are the major areas of difference. These data suggest that the labour market participation of the sole mothers is comparatively constrained by the difficulties associated with providing alternative care for their children while they are employed.

**Table 7.9: Problems with Childcare—Sole and Married Mothers**

Childcare Problem	Sole Mother	Married Mother
	%	%
No problem	56	70
Difficulty finding suitable childcare	10	5
The times available (hours)	5	4
Dealing with a sick child	0	2
Reliability	2	1
How much it costs	11	7
Access to the location	0	1
Quality of the actual care	4	2
Other	11	8
N	77	325

Data Source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

## 7.7 Labour Market Activity in Context

Placed within the context of the nature of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market, the results reported in this first section are somewhat contradictory. In summary, these results suggest that while sole mothers have a lower employment rate than married mothers, they are, conversely, more likely to be actively seeking work, equally likely to be working full-time, more likely to be affected by the presence of younger children, less happy with part-time work, and less likely to be out of the labour market through active choice. Thus, rather than needing more incentives and encouragement, sole mothers appear to want to participate in the labour market at higher rates than do married mothers.

How, then, can we explain why they do not do so? The differing pattern of mothers' employment is relevant here. As previously discussed, mothers' decisions around workforce participation are not made purely on the grounds of economic utility, but are the interactive product of sometimes clashing perceptions of household needs, motherhood ideologies and rationalisations of how these competing requirements can best be met. Parenting time and time spent generating market income operate in opposition. How the balance between these competing needs is viewed depends on how mothers weigh up the financial and non-financial gains and losses of paid work, compared to the consequent gains and losses of parenting/household time. While all mothers negotiate this income/time conundrum, several factors in this analyses point to a rather different context for sole mothers in making decisions about employment.

First, the disparity in the proportions of sole and married mothers actively opting out of the workforce to spend time with children suggests that married mothers have greater scope for choosing their mothering role over that of employment. Using Becker's (1981) household production model, paid work, translated into family income requirements, appears to be more of an imperative for sole mothers.

Paradoxically, however, although the non-working sole mothers report a greater desire for labour market participation than do the non-employed married mothers, the higher proportion of unemployed and under-employed sole mothers indicates the employment options are more limited for sole mothers. Secondly, therefore, the data suggest that the capacity of sole mothers to participate in the labour market is more constrained than for married mothers. While sole mothers express a stronger desire to

participate in the workforce than do married mothers, they also report that such participation is more difficult or less realisable. The extra difficulties reported by the sole mothers in accessing affordable, reliable and suitable childcare, especially after school and when children are sick, is just one area where the sole mothers face additional practical barriers to labour force participation.

Workforce activity, or lack of workforce activity, for sole mothers is, therefore, not just about choice. Other factors are obviously also at play, and the multiplicity of roles held by sole mothers – breadwinner, parent, and homemaker – offer an explanatory direction. While Becker's thesis articulates the need for a household to strike a balance between time allocated to paid and unpaid work, as the only adult in the household, such a balance might not be feasible for sole mothers. Vickery's (1977) concept of time poverty is more apt here, pointing as it does to the proportionately greater parenting time needs of sole mother households. In the zero-sum time equation, the lower portion of adult time available to sole rather than married mother households means that there literally may not be enough hours in the day to meet all the household's parenting work and market work time needs. Increased time allocated to paid work results in family time poverty, and increased time allocated to parenting work results in income time poverty. Both result in reduced family well-being.

The logical compromise solution to this income/time conundrum might seem to be engagement in part-time employment. Yet, while this option appears to meet the income/time balance needs of partnered mothers, the lower rates of part-time work consistently found among sole mothers in these data as well as ABS labour force statistics, point to part-time employment not being a viable economic strategy for sole mothers. The indication of a greater desire among the part-time sole mothers workers for more paid work hours adds weight to this supposition. Here, again, the maternal employment income/time trade-off helps explain this incongruity. Using this concept, the costs of part-time work for sole mothers seem particularly high. On the income side, high effective marginal tax rates, childcare costs and reductions of income support payments impact heavily on the financial advantages. From this perspective such work may in fact be an irrational choice.



## 7.8 Attitudes Towards Labour Market Participation

The idea that the sole mothers have a greater, not lesser, interest in labour market participation than do the married mothers is further supported by the analysis of the respondents' attitudes and values around employment. All the currently employed mothers hold strong work-related values, but the sole mothers appear to be proportionally more career minded and ambitious. As demonstrated in Table 7.10, while both groups record similar rating profiles on the importance of various job attributes, the sole mothers are consistently more likely to rate individual items as very important.

**Table 7.10: Importance of Aspects of Employment - Sole and Married Mothers**

<b>Job Variable</b>	<b>Very Important %</b>	<b>Important %</b>	<b>Somewhat Important %</b>	<b>Not at all important %</b>
<i>1. Opportunities for advancement</i>				
Sole Mothers	37	40	12	11
Married Mothers	34	34	13	19
<i>2. A job with flexible work hours</i>				
Sole Mothers	56	33	4	7
Married Mothers	52	32	6	6
<i>3. Having a secure job</i>				
Sole Mothers	70	27	2	1
Married Mothers	57	32	6	5
<i>4. The amount earned in the job</i>				
Sole Mothers	35	51	10	4
Married Mothers	27	57	12	4
<i>5. Job with little stress or pressure</i>				
Sole Mothers	34	25	20	11
Married Mothers	30	40	17	13
<i>6. Having a sense of satisfaction</i>				
Sole Mothers	72	26	1	2
Married Mothers	68	29	2	1

\*Chi square test indicates difference between sole and married mothers on item 3 significant at  $p < .001$   
Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

A t-test of the means of the summed scores of all six items confirms that the sole mothers' rating is significantly higher than that of the married mothers ( $t = 2.881$ ,  $df = 583$ ,  $p = .004$ ). This result suggests that the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of employment are more important to sole mothers. In turn, this supposition is

congruent with the different contexts of the mothers' labour market decisions. If we accept that employment is a larger investment for sole mothers in terms of time lost with children and income support benefits foregone, then the quality of that job becomes crucial. This explanation fits the individual item results. Notable among these is the very high rating given by the sole mothers to the importance of job security. Keeping a job appears more critical to the sole mothers than the married mothers. This result makes intuitive sense. Sole mothers face higher risks if a problem arises in or around work and, therefore, the stakes in choosing employment, for the sole mothers, are higher (Siemon 1999). The attributes of a job are also likely to be more of an imperative for sole mothers. Conditions that limit a sole mother's ability to combine paid market work with parenting responsibilities mean that such employment may be untenable over the longer term. For example, Zanetti's (1994) review of sole parents returning to income support found that the lack of paid leave to care for sick children was a major factor contributing to job loss among those sole parents. On the other hand, married mothers, usually as the second family wage earner, face fewer negative consequences from a break in employment continuity.

The complicated relationship between sole mothers and the labour market is also demonstrated in the data relating to how satisfied the employed mothers are with aspects of their current position. Although, as shown in Table 7.11, the sole and married mothers express very similar levels of overall job satisfaction, there are still important areas of difference. In particular, the sole mothers are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their current opportunities for advancement than are the married mothers. It is hard to judge whether this result signifies that the sole mothers have less actual prospect of promotion than married mothers do, or whether sole mothers are proportionally more ambitious. However, two factors would appear to favour the latter explanation. First, as outlined in earlier tables, the descriptions, benefits and responsibilities of jobs held by the mothers are very similar, suggesting that both groups have equal chances of promotion. Second, as shown previously in Table 7.10, the married mothers are less likely to rate opportunities for advancement as important or very important to them.

**Table 7.11: Satisfaction With Employment—Sole and Married Mothers**

	Very satisfied %	Satisfied %	Mixed feelings %	Dissatisfied %	Very dissatisfied %	Does not concern me %
<i>1. Relationship with co-workers</i>						
Sole Mothers	65	31	0	0	0	4
Married Mothers	54	42	0	1	.0	3
<i>2. How interesting your work is</i>						
Sole Mothers	33	54	4	0	1	0
Married Mothers	44	48	2	8	0	0
<i>3. Level of responsibility</i>						
Sole Mothers	34	63	0	1	0	0
Married Mothers	39	55	1	5	1	0
<i>4. Opportunities for training</i>						
Sole Mothers	20	45	5	18	5	8
Married Mothers	23	47	2	17	3	9
<i>5. Opportunities for advancement*</i>						
Sole Mothers	12	49	3	24	6	6
Married Mothers	13	58	1	15	2	11
<i>6. Flexibility of working hours</i>						
Sole Mothers	36	51	0	8	5	1
Married Mothers	35	53	1	10	1	1
<i>7. Security of the job</i>						
Sole Mothers	36	44	0	17	3	0
Married Mothers	28	53	1	14	4	1
<i>8. Amount you earn</i>						
Sole Mothers	13	62	1	19	5	0
Married Mothers	13	65	1	16	5	0
<i>9. Level of stress in your job</i>						
Sole Mothers	8	64	0	18	8	1
Married Mothers	10	63	4	19	4	0

\*Chi square test indicates differences between the sole and married mothers responses significant at  $p < .005$ .

These figures are based on a sample restricted to those respondents employed at the time of the survey.

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Further evidence of the relative career-mindedness of sole mothers comes from the analysis of data related to respondents' future objectives. In this question, respondents were asked how importantly they rated each of 20 future objectives. Two of these items, 'Advancing your career' and 'Improving your qualifications', relate to the respondents' career aspirations. Reliability statistics indicate that these two items can be combined into a single scale with a high score indicating a high value placed on future occupational aspirations (*Chronbach's Alpha* = .77). A t-test

of scale means finds that the sole mothers have significantly higher occupation-related aspirations than do the married mothers ( $t = 7.334$ ,  $df = 584$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

## 7.9 Answering the Question

The purpose of this chapter has been to address the sub-question related to the second dimension of the current study's overarching question, that is:

*Do the different levels of labour market participation by sole and married mothers represent a different orientation to labour market activity?*

Two main results emerge from the analysis reported here. The first is that although the sole mothers have lower labour market participation rates than do the married mothers, this difference is not necessarily an indication of a weaker orientation to the labour market. Rather, the data reveal that sole mothers are pursuing employment at a higher rate than married mothers, hold significantly higher career aspirations and are less likely to actively choose non-participation than married mothers. Taken together, these findings indicate that sole mothers actually have a stronger, rather than lesser, attachment to the labour market. While other research evidence in this area is scarce, an intuitive explanation of these data suggest that without a partner's income, full-time employment and work-based rewards are more attractive to the sole mothers than to the married mothers. For sole mothers, the prospect of a career appears to be more highly linked to personal status and satisfaction, as well as a better lifestyle for their family, even if current family needs restrict this to a future aspiration. These findings would appear to strongly contradict any suggestion of a weak work ethic among sole mothers compared to the work ethic of married mothers.

Second, achieving the balance between family and work is more problematic for sole mothers. For sole mothers, the lower proportions of sole mothers working part-time, the higher unemployment rate and the importance attached to job security, should not be taken as an indication of a more limited connection to market work. Instead, the data suggest that trying to practically balance market work while still fulfilling their obligations as a parent is particularly difficult for sole mothers. The utility of a household depends not only on an income budget, but also on the sufficient allocation of time for parenting and household work (Becker 1981; Vickery 1977).

Yet, the market work and unpaid work requirements of a family cannot be achieved simultaneously, and the resulting income/time conundrum means that a workable balance is particularly fraught with difficulty for sole mother households.

The data presented in this chapter suggest that the precariousness of this balance of income/time needs for sole mother families is primarily related to the 'soleness' of their parenting. Part-time work, in particular, is of very dubious benefit. The greater family time demands of sole mothers means that when children are young, welfare payments may need to be substituted for employment income. These arguments do not claim that combining mothering and paid work is easy for married or partnered mothers. Rather, that the unique constraints inherent in the 'soleness' of sole mothering clearly impact on the economic strategies open to sole mothers. These results have implications for welfare reform policies that will intensify the work requirements on sole parents. Where this leaves the unpaid responsibilities of rearing children in sole mother families is unexplained within these policies and the associated political rhetoric. It is clear, from the foregoing analysis, that paid employment and family well-being are neither straightforward nor necessarily mutually achievable concepts for sole mothers.

There is, of course, an even more practical question that needs to be asked in relation to the comparative relationship of sole and married mothers to the labour market. As well as the ability to manage the dual role of income earner and parent, the economic efficacy of labour market participation for the sole mothers and married mother household needs to be ascertained. Even if a sole mother considers that employment in the labour market is compatible with the parenting work of sole mothering, and a practicable balance between the two roles is feasible, is that paid work necessarily a financially viable option for the household? The relative and comparative economic benefit of labour market participation for mothers' household material well-being is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter Eight: Labour Market Activity and Material Well-being

*What is the comparative impact of sole and married mothers' occupational and partnered status on their households' level of material well-being?*

### 8.0 Introduction

In Australian studies of poverty, the over-representation of sole parents among the economically disadvantaged is well documented. The generally low level of material well-being in sole mother families is undisputed within this literature. The social policy response to sole motherhood, and the poverty associated with sole motherhood, is also relatively undisputed. Since the mid-1980s, policy has variously proposed roughly the same recourse: greater labour market participation. The process of welfare reform has re-emphasised the validity of increased labour market activity as the appropriate aim of sole parent social policy. The unilateral acceptance of workforce participation as a desirable objective also presumes the financial efficacy of such activity. In Australia, as elsewhere, such participation is clearly seen as a financial positive for sole parent families. As the Minister's Welfare Reform Discussion Paper argues: 'Getting a job—even a part-time job—is the best way for parents and children to achieve financial security' (Newman 1999, p. 20).

Perhaps, given rising female employment rates, encouraging or even obligating sole mothers to maximise their income from employment is just and logical. Yet, how do we know that increasing labour market participation will lead to a significant increase in material well-being for sole mother households? A growing body of evidence indicates that the relationship between work and welfare, especially for sole mother households, may not be that simple. This chapter queries the presumed positive link between employment activity and material well-being in sole mother families. In doing so, it addresses the sub-question linked to the third dimension of the current study's investigation of sole mothers relationship with the labour market. To begin the chapter, a range of recent empirical research on the workforce

participation, welfare receipt and poverty of sole mother families is reviewed. Following this, the theoretical issues important to operationalising the concept of material well-being are detailed, along with the rationale for selecting the three models of material well-being used in these analyses. Finally, using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, these three models are utilised to assess the relative importance of a broad range of variables on the level of household material well-being for the sole and married mother respondents.

## **8.1 Efficacy of Labour Market Participation**

The vision encapsulated in current Australian welfare reform policies is the replacement of sole mothers' welfare income with monies from the labour market. A basic premise of this view is that work is beneficial for those who use it as a means of support and that welfare, generally, is not. This way of thinking about work and welfare, at least in the broader political discourse, assumes a clear connection between labour market participation and material well-being. In this context, the economically disadvantaged position of sole mother families is causally linked to statistically low rates of workforce activity. Yet, despite the pervasiveness of this policy assumption, empirical evidence to support the premise is limited. Moreover, in recent times, a raft of research has begun to cast doubt on the underlying supposition. This research literature is varied but revolves around two key themes. The first is the instability of much of the employment available for sole mothers, leading to a revolving door of welfare receipt rather than a permanent exit from income support. The second, more controversial, idea is that the poverty in sole mother families may not be alleviated by market work and in some cases is actually exacerbated by workforce entry. These two themes are discussed below as a forerunner to this chapter's analysis. While much of the research cited in this section is based on overseas studies, the findings have resonance for Australian sole mothers.

### **8.1.1 Welfare to Work and Back Again**

Taking the job route away from welfare receipt is not necessarily an efficient path to economic independence. American-based research finds that such exits are often transitory, family stressing and ultimately may be counterproductive in reducing reliance on welfare income. In a quantitative analysis of the life circumstances of

American sole mothers after a welfare-to-work transition, Harris (1996) finds that more than half of these sole mothers soon return to welfare payments. For the majority, employment is periodic, temporary and linked to a pattern of revolving door welfare dependency rather than financial self-reliance. A more recent study (Harris & Edin 2000) also establishes the short-term nature of welfare-to-work exits for many sole mothers. Here, welfare return was highest amongst younger, urban women and most likely to occur seven to twelve months following the work exit. Those with the youngest children, the least human capital via education, work experience and skills were the most vulnerable to being unable to maintain their family through employment income. In line with labour market opportunities, those with greater education had a reduced risk of repeat dependency. More worryingly, those who returned to welfare from employment had increasingly less chance of leaving welfare support permanently.

Although the data are more limited, Australian findings exhibit similar patterns. For Australian sole mothers, exiting income support because of employment provides no guarantee of staying off support payments. In a sole parent payment exit study conducted on behalf of FaCS, Chalmers (1999) found that approximately 55 per cent of those who ceased payment because of earnings returned to income support within twelve months. The employment opportunities taken up by many of these sole parents obviously proved to be insecure or unsustainable in the longer term.

### **8.1.2 Labour Market Participation as Poverty Amelioration**

More importantly, for sole mother families, labour market participation does not necessarily provide an escape from poverty. Rather, empirical evidence increasingly demonstrates the dynamic and sometimes contradictory nature of workforce participation, income support receipt and poverty in sole mother families. Recent data from the United States indicates that while welfare reform there has substantially reduced welfare rolls, there has been no corresponding decrease in poverty levels. Rather, despite the proportion of single mothers in the labour market being at an all-time high, the average income of those families has fallen since the introduction of US welfare reform (The Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities 1999). In a qualitative study, Edin and Lein (1997) find that sole mothers on low wages are economically worse off than those receiving welfare payments. Similarly,



Baker (2000), examining data from cross-national research, concludes that unless sole mothers can earn an above-average income, they are better off receiving social assistance.

A report from the US Census Bureau (Bauman 2000) actually finds a negative association between work and material well-being for many sole mother families. Examining the impact of work and welfare receipt on material well-being in American households, the study finds that working sole mothers need to bring in substantially more income than do non-working sole mothers to avoid experiencing hardship. The report speculates that the hidden costs of work are much higher for sole parents. Moreover, while income poverty is higher amongst those fully reliant on welfare than those fully reliant on the labour force, material hardship is greatest in households that are in between. Sole mothers who work part-year have higher levels of household hardship than those who do not work at all. Bauman (2000) concludes that while work is not detrimental to single parent households in an absolute sense, and can reduce poverty in some circumstances, work does not mean the same thing for sole parents as it does for most other households. Similarly, Harris and Edin (2000) find that American sole mothers who combine work and welfare have on average a household income only \$2000 per annum higher than those who rely totally on welfare. Citing Bane and Ellwood (1994), the authors note that the realisation that when poor mothers work they do not necessarily gain much in income over welfare is an emerging factor in social policy discourse. Rather, they argue, in many instances, work for poor women should be viewed as the *problem* (original emphasis), not the solution.

In contrast to the research cited above, social policy based research has traditionally accepted the 'market work as poverty solution' thesis. These analyses, while adding substantially to the understanding of sole mothers' employment situation, tend, first, to assume an established causal link between market activity and material well-being and, second, presuppose that sole mothers' employment rates are primarily sensitive to financial incentives. Based on these dual but largely unsubstantiated beliefs, such research usually aims to establish ways of increasing the workforce activity of sole mothers. For example Bradshaw et al. (1996), examining the labour market participation of sole mothers across 20 countries, begins from the basic premise that 'paid work is the best route out of poverty for lone mothers' (p. 9). Australian studies

(see Perry 1992; Frey 1986; Raymond 1986), while earlier, tend to follow the same logic. Yet even in studies that assume this underlying link between poverty and low labour market participation the findings can be ambiguous. British researchers Bryson, Ford and White (1997) use panel data to analyse variations of material well-being between and within sole parent households. The following factors are identified as positively linked to hardship: the presence of more children; having an ill child; living in an urban area; living in public housing; and being a smoker. Factors linked to reducing multiple deprivation are: having any educational qualifications; grandparents available or co-resident; a paid job; living with a working partner; a higher income; and more savings. Within these factors, the effect of sole mothers' employment status on material well-being is comparatively weak, decreasing as the model of well-being increases in complexity. Thus, overall, the study finds that while moving into or out of paid work does affect material well-being, it is not the definitive variable.

### **8.1.3 Just Get a Job, Any Job**

It is likely that labour market trends form part of the explanation for why employment does not necessarily alleviate poverty in sole mother families. As outlined in Chapter Three, the majority of new jobs available in the Australian labour market, especially those in the relatively unskilled sector, are casual, low wage positions with part-time, changeable hours. Participation by sole mothers in these jobs is unlikely to guarantee significantly higher family incomes. Indeed, income support statistics indicate that work is already an integral part of the lives of many sole mothers. Close to one-third of sole parents on income support already declare employment earnings (Wilson, Pech & Bates 1999), yet remain substantially welfare reliant despite this labour market activity. The interaction of the social security system and low paying employment also impact on the financial viability of paid work for Australian sole mothers. Using 1997 data, Redmond (1999) calculates that under social security income tests, financial incentives for employment are relatively low until earnings reach at least \$300 per week. As earnings rise to \$500 per week, the financial incentive increases strongly. However, as detailed in Chapter Two, the earnings of most Australian sole parents fall well under \$300 per week. For the majority of relatively low skilled Australian sole mothers, the chances of finding secure employment at \$500 a week in the current labour market is also not strong.

Policy assumptions about work and material well-being also appear formulated in isolation of ongoing economic and social change. On the one hand, welfare reform rhetoric argues that getting work, any work, is a positive outcome, while on the other, labour market policy is operating to reduce real wages and conditions for low skilled workers. Whatever the motivation of sole mothers to work, the radically altered nature of the job market means that the chances of being more financially secure from paid work must be seriously questioned. The presumption that employability will ensure employment and that employment will, in turn, allow an escape from poverty and benefit dependency appears fundamentally flawed. Not only is there not enough work available for all who seek it but, as a result of economic restructuring, many of the jobs that are available are low wage, low skill and of short duration.

Data from other English speaking countries, where welfare reform measures have already been implemented, bear out this contention. For example, British researchers Ford and Millar (1998) find that the introduction of the in-work benefit, Family Credit, has operated successfully to encourage more sole mothers into employment. Yet, despite this additional market activity, neither the extent of sole mother family poverty nor welfare dependence have been significantly reduced. Instead, the authors conclude, the state effectively may be just subsidising sole mothers into low-pay jobs. Another British study (Bryson, Ford & White 1997) finds sole mothers' ability to prosper in paid work is constrained by their access to mainly poor paying jobs. Those on Family Credit earned a quarter less than could be expected from their other characteristics. Similarly, Finlayson and Marsh (1998) argue that social policy aimed at moving sole parents off income support into low-skill, short hours work will never result in sole mothers achieving financial independence. Further, sole mothers are likely to remain stranded in low-wage jobs, even after their children grow up. While Australian research in this area is again limited, labour market data indicating an explosion in part-time and casual jobs suggest that results may be similar here.

## **8.2 Material Well-being**

Given these data, therefore, it must be asked whether increased workforce activity is likely to result in an increase in material well-being for Australian sole mothers: this question contains, within its structure, two basic elements. The first element relates

to the assumed efficacy of increased labour market activity for raising levels of material well-being for sole mother households. Although current social policy operates within an assumption that increasing labour market participation is a positive outcome, as shown in the previous section overseas research increasingly indicates that market work by sole mothers does not necessarily result in higher levels of material well-being (see Edin & Lein 1997; Harris & Edin 2000; Bauman 2000). The second element addresses how the experience of being a sole mother, rather than a married mother, fits into any explanation of household material well-being? The influence of a mother's partnered status on household level of material well-being, in comparison with other characteristics such as education levels and personal or social characteristics, but especially employment and occupational status, is also highly salient. These two elements are explored in the following analysis.

### **8.2.1 Operationalising Material Well-Being**

Material well-being, defined by Richardson and Travers (1993, p. 1) as 'that aspect of human well-being which can be affected by a change in produced goods and services', is, as a concept, integral to the analysis and impact of social policy. Social policy can operate to reduce or increase individual or household material well-being and, as Richardson and Travers (1993) argue, the analysis of relative material well-being is of fundamental importance precisely because it is a sphere of life that is so easily influenced by social policy. As such, material well-being is also fundamental in contemporary debates on the correct role of the state in supporting its citizens. Yet, while the importance of material well-being for household welfare is relatively uncontested, operationalising what actually constitutes material well-being is not. As Harding (1998) notes, to assess material well-being we must first determine how to measure the concept itself. This is no straightforward task.

Much of the difficulty in operationalising a measure of material well-being relates to the almost endless list of factors that could, or should, be included. While actual income is the most obvious component, this goes only partway to defining economic well-being. Other factors such as non-cash government benefits around health and education, indirect tax, value of leisure, home production, imputed rent, capital gains and fringe benefits also contribute to a household's standard of living (Harding 1998). Indeed, an absolutely accurate index would first require the construction of a

list of all things that lead to material well-being. Such a list is beyond the scope of the most dedicated and resourced researcher. By necessity, therefore, indicators use a proxy, or a subset of factors, to represent material well-being (Richardson & Travers 1993). Consequently, in most operationalised measures there is a gap between the ideal and what is possible. The construction and shape of a particular measure tends to be driven by the purpose for which the measure is intended.

Using a constructed measure to quantify the level of material well-being is equally challenging. Definitions of material well-being often incorporate aspects of living that are not easily measured, such as quality of life or opportunity for future prosperity (Johnson 1998). Yet, for a measure to be usable, not only must the relative value of the contributing factors be decided, but reliable empirical values of these items must be calculated. Even where a value can be gauged, this methodology has a downside in that it implies that items are directly comparable. As Richardson and Travers (1993) note, while health and wealth are both important in well-being, they are not interchangeable. Being rich, but sick, is not the same as being poor, but healthy.

### **8.2.2 Unit of Measurement**

While material well-being resources are gathered at the individual level, most people live as part of a family household. As households resources are usually shared and the consequent economies of scale make assigning proportions of resources to individual members difficult, most comparative analyses of material well-being use the household, rather than the individual, as the basic measurement unit. However, this methodology is not without problems. First, it is necessary to determine what constitutes a household. Are all household members included, such as adult children and other relatives, or just parents and dependent children? Second, as Goodin et al. (1999) note, the assumption of household resource sharing is open to challenge given what little is known about actual patterns of income distribution within households. In justification, researchers point out that it is difficult not to share a good deal of the standard of living of a household such as the quality and location of the house. Accordingly, by convention, most research assumes, for statistical purposes at least, that household income is shared according to need (Richardson & Travers 1993; Bittman 1998; Goodin et al. 1999). My study also uses the family household as its

unit of measurement. While sole and married mothers are this study's reference points, by definition all the mothers are adults living in households containing one or more dependent children. The family household unit for this study is defined as:

*Parent/s and children under the age of 18 years living in the same household*

No sole or married mother cases, in this study, report any adults other than parents or adult children living in the household.

### **8.2.3 Equivalence Scales**

Another problem with using households as the unit for analysis is that households are not homogenous entities. Households vary in size, composition and resources needed for a particular level of material well-being. To overcome variation issues, most comparative analyses utilise equivalence scales. An equivalence scale is, in effect, a construct by which the needs of a particular income unit are equated with the needs of others, allowing for the calculation of the relative income required by different family types to attain a similar standard of living (Whiteford 1985, cited in Trigger 2000). However, as Saunders (1998) cautions, equivalising household income is more an art than a science. An array of equivalence scales exist and these vary considerably in the weightings they attach to household members, especially children. For example, the scale advocated by the US Panel on Poverty of the Family and Children gives a value of 0.7 for each child, compared to the value placed on children in the Henderson equivalence scale of 0.3. The wide variation means that the choice of scale may impact on both the recorded level of household material well-being and inequality (Trigger 2000). A household of two adults and two children is equivalent to 3.4 adults using the US Panel on Poverty scale, but only 2.6 adults if using the Henderson scale. The assumption of equivalence scales that children should be weighted less because they cost less is also questionable. This assumption does not take into account child specific costs such as child care and also presumes that parents' and particularly mothers' labour in child raising is cost free.

Trigger (2000) cites Buhmann et al. (1988, p. 139) in concluding that no clear-cut winner, or theoretically more satisfying equivalence scale, has yet emerged. As such, he suggests, it is appropriate to use more than one equivalence scale to minimise the impact of variation in an individual scale on results. Taking this advice, my study's analysis details the results using measures of material well-being constructed from

two alternate equivalence scales. The first of these is the square root of household size method (SQRT). This particular scale is promoted as representing a 'middle ground' approach, which neither ignores the economies of scale that can be achieved by larger households, nor the significant extra costs that households with additional members incur (Bittman 1998; Goodin et al. 1999). Goodin et al. (1999), in particular, note that this scale is recommended by the OECD. In calculating 'square root of household size equivalent income', all parental household income is totalled and then divided by the equivalence scale. Thus:

$$\text{Equivalence formula} = \text{HI} / \sqrt{N}$$

Where: HI = Total Household Income  
N = Total adults and children under 18 years resident in household

The second equivalence scale selected is the OECD (new) scale (OECDN). In this scale the first adult is rated as 1.0, the second adult is 0.5 and each child is 0.3. Thus:

$$\text{Equivalence formula} = \text{HI} / S$$

Where: HI = Total Household Income  
S = Total value adults and children under 18 years resident in household using the OECD (new) scale.

This scale is designated the OECD (new) scale in order to differentiate it from the older OECD scale where the value of the second adult and children was higher. As demonstrated later in the results of this chapter, the use of measures of material well-being constructed with alternative equivalence scales, while showing a similar distributive pattern of results, yields different numerical outcomes. This outcome variability is not seen as problematic, as the analyses do not aim to measure the level of inequality per se. The relative poverty of sole parent families has been established repeatedly and comprehensively by other researchers. Rather, the purpose here is to examine the efficacy of the sole and married mothers' labour market participation and the impact of partnered status on their level of household material well-being. The measure of material well-being, therefore, need not generate a precise reflection of economic inequality. Instead, the reporting of results using two scales emphasises the influence of different scales on the results while also demonstrating the similarity of outcomes regardless of the scale used.

### **8.3 A Multiplicity of Measures of Material Well-being**

Given the difficulties in defining, measuring and comparing material well-being, it is not surprising that a myriad of measures have been designed and utilised. These vary in complexity and form, and arguments can be made for the selection of particular measures, depending first on the purpose and context of the analysis, and second (and more practically), on the sources of data available to the researcher.

#### **8.3.1 Monetary and Non-Monetary Measures of Material Well-being**

The most common methods of measuring material well-being are based on financial resources. Money income is a direct and easily comparable indicator, with comparisons able to be made within populations and across time. Money data also has the advantage of being relatively easily obtained from existing databases. For example, the quarterly poverty lines published by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research are calculated using an index of household disposable income estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (MIAESR 2000).

The sole reliance on money income as the main measure of material well-being has significant limitations. Money income measures capacity to purchase well-being, rather than material well-being itself. Some researchers, therefore, perceive expenditure to be a more reliable indicator in that it reflects the flow of services from which material well-being is derived. For example, Bradshaw and Holmes (1989, cited in Brownlee 1990) concentrate on 'way of life' indicators derived from expenditure patterns, arguing that family living standards are better represented by what a family spends and buys rather than its income. This argument has merit. Yet determining material well-being using expenditure is, in turn, limited by the difficulty of collecting reliable and representative data (Richardson & Travers 1993). In recognition of these limitations, a wide variety of other non-monetary measures are utilised. For instance, Bauman (2000), examining the level of household material hardship, uses indicators such as the incidence of inability to meet essential expenses, or having services cut off due to non-payment.

Other researchers recognise the advantages of indicators measured in income terms, but argue for a fuller definition of what constitutes that income. Townsend's (1979,



cited in Brownlee 1990) pioneering work on poverty broadened the measurement of material well-being to a wider definition of economic resources and way of life items. Townsend included items such as capital assets, the value of employment benefits in kind, the value of public social services in kind, and private income in kind as well as cash income. This basic model has since been built on and modified. For example, in their comparison of how individuals fare in different welfare states, Goodin et al. (1999) use an income model that incorporates labour income, asset income, private transfers such as gifts and child support, public transfers such as social security payments and owner-occupier imputed net rent. Similarly, Richardson and Travers' (1993) 'full income' model incorporates all money income received, the annual value of household goods and assets, owner occupier's imputed net rent, the value of adult non-employed time and non-cash benefits such as family assistance, childcare assistance and the value of Pensioner and Allowee Concession Cards.

There are considerable advantages in utilising broad income-based indicators of material well-being. First, the amenity of indicators expressed in income units to more complex statistical analysis is particularly useful. Second, broader measures, while more comprehensive than money income, allow researchers to develop a clear rationale for the items incorporated into their measure and the values imputed to them. Third, combining items into a single index allows for an unambiguous ranking. Fourth, and most important, broader income-based measures may be a better predictor of comparative inequality than money. Richardson and Travers (1993), for example, argue that their 'full income' model allows for the comparison of inequality among groups where life cycle position and life style differ. Money alone, they say, is only a valid indicator where labour force participation, patterns of home ownership and distribution, and level of government indirect taxes and benefits are the same. On the negative side, however, a broad income-based index still measures resources only and is still some distance from a complete picture of utility. The methodology also makes heavy demands on data, and the many imputations required may result in a reduced credibility of the index. As Harding (1998) cautions, the further a measure moves beyond disposable income, the greater the problems due to data deficiencies and a lack of consensus of appropriate methodology. The use of equivalence scales on these broad income-based measures may also be problematic. Equivalence scales were developed for cash income only, and the validity of their use in broader measure of well-being, although common, might be questioned.

## **8.4 Does the Way We Measure Material Well-being Matter?**

Given the large variety in the way material well-being is both defined and measured, does it matter which method is selected? As implied, a substantial body of evidence suggests that the way material well-being is measured can significantly affect results. Harding (1998) points to evidence showing that the more comprehensive the definition of material well-being, the more income inequality tends to be reduced. For example, Richardson and Travers (1993) find that the use of different measures significantly changes the inequality rankings of household types. When equivalent income only is used, widows are as poorly off as the divorced. But when a broader income measure is used, the ranking of widows reverts to a level similar to the general population and divorced households are more than twice as likely as widows to be found in the bottom quintile. Thus, the distribution of income is sensitive to how the income is measured. Such inconsistency in results from different measures would not matter if there were a consensus as to the most appropriate methodology, or a hierarchy of validity. However, as Trigger (2000) concludes in his review of Australian and international poverty measurement literature, no such consensus exists. Therefore, given the degree of sensitivity to the choice of indicator, results derived from a single measure should be evaluated with care.

### **8.4.1 Advantages of Multiple Measures of Material Well-being**

As different measures likely provide different results, many researchers utilise more than one measure of material well-being. These indexes tend to be related and varying in complexity, from simple through to broad measures of material well-being. Johnson (1998), for example, uses five measures to demonstrate the complexity of measuring poverty. These range from simple direct income to a measure comprised of disposable income, the imputed value of non-cash government transfers such as health and education, and an imputed rent value for homeowners. By using multiple measures, his analyses find that while the relative positions of households stay roughly the same, the actual level of poverty varies significantly across the measures. Similarly, Travers and Richardson's (1993) comparison of household inequality uses four measures to demonstrate that a fuller version of material well-being shows relative advantage/disadvantage much more clearly than do simpler income-only based measures. These examples demonstrate that, as with

equivalence scales, using more than one measure of material well-being has significant advantages. First, multiple measures allow results to be compared for consistency. Thus, if a degree of advantage or disadvantage persists for a particular group across different measures, a more robust definition of that group's place in the hierarchy of material well-being can be made. Additionally, the use of a multi-dimensional approach to measurement reduces the likelihood that results are due to choice of methodology. Second, multi-dimensional measurement allows less obvious factors and dynamic interactions to be considered. The variation in ranking distribution across different measures found by most researchers suggests that each measure is actually capturing something distinctive (Richardson & Travers 1993). Thus, an array of measures allows a deeper comparative picture of relative material well-being to be developed. Third, the impact of different factors can be followed across indicators. Because inequality tends to reduce as measures of material well-being become broader, utilising a range of increasingly complex measures shows a pattern of influence of different variables. This, in turn, may allow a more detailed theoretical interpretation of the results:

## **8.5 Modelling Material Well-being**

Defining and measuring material well-being, then, is a task fraught with difficulty. Nonetheless, given the concept's significance in this analysis, the choice of an appropriate definition and measurement of material well-being is an important one. The challenge is to find a model that: accurately reflects the different dimensions of material well-being required for the research purpose; is empirically measurable; and is compatible with the data available to the researcher. Finally, to maximise the validity of results, the model chosen must be as comprehensive as possible. With these selection criteria in mind, three alternative models of material well-being are selected, building in complexity from measures one to three. These are:

- Material Well-being 1: Respondent Wage Income (EARNINGS)
- Material Well-being 2: Equivalent Household Income (HOUSEHOLD)
- Material Well-being 3: Equivalent Full Income (FULL INCOME)

These measures form the dependent variables in this analysis. All three measures are income-based. This attribute facilitates standard statistical analyses and allows a

direct comparison of results across and within measures. This is important, as the measures vary in the comprehensiveness of the dimensions of material well-being that they embody. Additionally, the models are those identified as the most appropriate for both the research purpose and the NLC dataset. However, as with all such indicators, the measures are also inevitably limited.

### **8.5.1 Material Well-being 1: Respondents' Earnings (EARNINGS)**

Measure 1 is based on the respondent's labour market income and is a measure of annual earnings from employment. The regression analysis for this model is restricted to mothers who report positive annual earnings. Given that approximately 37 per cent of the sample are not employed, with consequent earnings of zero, the inclusion of these cases could result in a severely censored dependent variable. That is, one that does not effectively observe income for respondents without jobs. Using ordinary least squares regression to analyse dependent variables that are censored in this way produces biased and inconsistent estimates of the regression parameters (Long 1997, chapter 7). The most straightforward way to deal with this situation is to restrict the analysis to respondents reporting annual earnings, which is the strategy adopted here. Respondent net earnings have been used in this measure, on the rationale that the purchasing power of income is related to the net amount received rather than the gross. In order to reduce the effect of outliers, six cases with extreme respondent earnings values of over \$100,000 per annum are excluded, bringing the total number of cases to 365. Details of the treatment of missing values ( $n = 23$ ) are included in Chapter Five.

### **8.5.2 Material Well-being 2: Equivalent Household Income (HOUSEHOLD)**

Measure 2 is based on the annual total household income equivalised across household size. Household income is defined as non-government income from all sources (mostly market-based) plus government payments. Household disposable income (HOUSEHOLD) is an aggregate of all income from the following sources:

- Respondents' employment earnings
- Social Security income
- Other income – rent, interest, dividends

- Child support income
- Partner's income where applicable
- Business income.

Total household disposable income for sole and married mother households is then equivalised. Again, those six cases with extreme respondent earnings values of over \$100,000 per annum are excluded from the analysis, bringing the total number of cases to 579. Details of how individual income components are calculated and the treatment of missing values were explained in Chapter Five. Child support, in particular, is an important component of household income for these analyses. The major objective of the Child Support Scheme is that non-custodial parents share in the cost of supporting their children (*Child Support Bill 1987*). Thus, child support payments received by sole mothers may be expected to go some way towards reducing the equivalent household income differentials between partnered and unpartnered mothers. The inclusion of social security payments, especially those attached to sole parent status, is also expected to reduce household inequalities.

### **8.5.3 Material Well-being 3: Equivalent Full Income (FULL INCOME)**

For the third measure, this study uses a version of Richardson and Travers' (1993) 'full income'. In this variation, two aspects of Richardson and Travers' model, the annual value of consumer durables and assets, and cash and in-kind benefits from other family, are not available in the Negotiating the Life Course dataset. Despite this limitation, however, the major elements of the model are maintained.

The components of FULL INCOME are:

- Annual household income from all sources
- Value of non-cash benefit of Centrelink concession cards
- Value of non-employed parental time
- Value of imputed rent from home ownership.

To obtain FULL INCOME, these components are divided into two groups. The first, the imputed value of household disposable income, adult non-employed time and the value of Centrelink concession cards, are summed and then equivalised using the two alternate equivalence scales. The imputed value of housing equity is then added to this total, providing an estimate of the value of equivalent FULL INCOME. This

measure of material well-being is thus a computationally complicated index.

However, as argued by Richardson and Travers (1993), the effort in constructing a full income measure is well spent, as the differences obtained with this measure are not trivial.

The value of adult non-employed time is a vital element in this measure. This variable acknowledges the trade-off in market and non-employed time faced by households and the interrelationship between time use in market and family work. Both activities are needed for household utility and poverty in households can result from a lack of time as well as a lack of income (Becker 1981; Vickery 1977). As Whiteford (1991, p. 70) argues, 'the living standards of individuals are not only the products of what they can purchase with money, but how those purchases are transformed into consumption through inputs of time'. Further, the inclusion of non-employed time recognises that parenting work is indeed work, the undertaking of which requires the expending of significant time and effort in family households. In urging the inclusion of a time variable in broad measures of material well-being, Richardson and Travers (1993) reason that individuals choose how many hours they work. Therefore, if they choose to work fewer hours it can be inferred that the value to them of the other things they do with their non-employed hours is at least equal to the extra income that they could receive by working. Thus, a value for this time should be included in any fuller measure of material well-being. Although the assumption of full choice in an individual's work hours is highly contestable, such assumptions need to be made to allow a value to be imputed to non-labour market time: 'To remain silent on the issue of non-employed time is the same as imputing a value of zero to this vital household resource' (Richardson & Travers 1993, p. 32). Non-employed time is valued in this analysis at the same rate as a person's employed hourly rate. For those not employed, an earnings function, based on education level, is calculated to obtain a predicted wage. The Richardson and Travers model uses a wider earnings function based on education, level of experience and marital status. This method is not appropriate for this analysis due to the dichotomous nature of respondents' marital status and the high number of cases with little or no work experience. Each person is assumed to have 50 hours per week available for employment and non-employed time. The formula for calculating the value of non-employed time equals:

$$[(50 - \text{hours worked previous week}) * \text{hourly wage}] * 365.25/7$$

The FULL INCOME measure also addresses the problem of how to give a monetary value to those items not directly measurable in money terms. In the case of housing, researchers argue that for owner-occupiers the service they receive from their house is a major form of tax-free, income in kind (Harding 1998). In FULL INCOME, the imputed value of home ownership is calculated as 5 per cent of the family's estimated equity in their home, the same rate used in the Richardson and Travers' model.

Similarly, the inclusion of the value of concession cards recognises that the non-cash benefits attached to government payments can, to some extent, mediate lower income levels. With the Pensioner Concession Card, for which most sole parents are eligible, non-cash benefits include medicines at reduced cost under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, reductions in property and water rates, reductions in energy bills, a telephone allowance, reduced fares on public transport, reductions on motor vehicle and access to one or more free rail journeys per year (Centrelink 2001b). The Health Care Card, available to non-pensioner beneficiaries such as those on Newstart or Parenting Payment (Partnered), attracts slightly fewer concessions. Each case recording the receipt of an income support payment such as Parenting Payment (partnered or single), Newstart or Disability Support Pension is assumed to also be in receipt of a concession card. The value of a concession card is calculated as \$1,324 per annum, based on the \$1,200 value used by Richardson and Travers (1993) and adjusted by the CPI to 1996/97 levels. The three models of material well-being are summarised in Table 8.1 below.

As in the EARNINGS and HOUSEHOLD models, those six cases with extreme respondent earnings values of over \$100,000 per annum are excluded from the analysis, leaving a total sample of 579 cases. Details of how individual income components are calculated and the treatment of missing values for the FULL INCOME measure are contained in Chapter Five.

**Table 8.1: Response Variables in Regression Analysis**

<b>Response Variable</b>	<b>Variable Description</b>
<i>Material Well-being 1</i> Respondents' earnings per annum	Annual earnings from employment (\$0 - \$100,000)
<i>Material Well-Being 2</i> Equivalent household income per annum	<p>Total annual household income from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respondents' employment earnings</li> <li>Social Security income (all)</li> <li>Other income – rent, Interest, dividends</li> <li>Child support income</li> <li>Partner's income</li> <li>Business income</li> </ul> <p>Equivalence formula 1 = <math>HI/o(N)</math>  Where: <math>HI</math> = Total household income  <math>N</math> = Total adults and children &lt; 18 in household</p> <p>Equivalence formula 2 = <math>HI/S</math>  Where: <math>HI</math> = Total Household Income  Where: <math>S</math> = Adults and children &lt; 18 in household as per OECD (new) values</p>
<i>Material Well-Being 3</i> Equivalent full income per annum	<p>Total income from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Total annual household income</li> <li>(b) Value of adult non-employed time</li> <li>(c) Value of DSS concession cards</li> </ul> <p>Where: Value of adult non-employed Time =  <math>[(50 - \text{hours worked previous week}) * \text{hourly wage}] * 365.25/7</math>  Equivalence formula 1 = <math>(a + b + c)/o(N)</math>  Where: <math>N</math> = total adults and children &lt; 18 in household</p> <p>Equivalence formula 2 = <math>(a + b + c)/S</math>  Where: <math>S</math> = Adults and children &lt; 18 in household as per OECD (new) values</p> <p>+ Value of housing equity  Where: Value of housing equity =  <math>(\text{Value of Property}) - (\text{Amount Owing}) * 5\%</math></p>

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97

### 8.5.4 Isolating the Factors Associated with Material Well-being

A particular level of material well-being is the result of many different and interacting factors. It is, therefore, a difficult task to fully quantify the effects of each of the large range of possible influences on mothers' material well-being. For this reason, this analysis does not claim to present a complete exposition of the determination of material well-being. Rather, it attempts to disentangle the data in broad terms to draw empirical links between mothers' attributes, characteristics,



circumstances and levels of material well-being. The range of explanatory variables used in these analyses and their constructions are detailed in Table 8.2.

**Table 8.2: Explanatory Variables in Regression Analysis**

Variable	Description
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	
Age	Respondent's age in years (18–54)
Education	Respondent's education in years (6–18)
Respondent's health	Ordinal variable in 4 levels 1 = Excellent 2 = Good 3 = Fair 4 = Poor
Respondent's country of birth	Categorical variable with 3 dummy variables 1 = Australian born, 0 = Other 1 = Overseas born – English speaking country 0 = Other 1 = Overseas born – Non-English speaking country 0 = Other Base category: Overseas born – Non-English speaking country
<i>Family Background Characteristics</i>	
Respondent's father's country of birth	Categorical variable with 3 dummy variables 1 = Australian born, 0 = Other 1 = Overseas born – English speaking country 0 = Other 1 = Overseas born – Non-English speaking country 0 = Other Base category: Overseas born – Non-English speaking country
Respondent's father's occupation type	Categorical variable with 3 dummy variables 1 = Professional/administrative, 0 = Other 1 = Trade or clerical, 0 = Other 1 = Manual labour/sales, 0 = Other Base category: manual labour/sales
Respondent's mother's education level	Categorical variable with 3 dummy variables 1 = Incomplete secondary, 0 = Other 1 = Complete secondary, 0 = Other 1 = Post-school qualification 0 = Other Base category: Incomplete secondary
<i>Family Characteristics</i>	
Children (total)	Continuous variable
Preschool children	Continuous variable
Primary children (<13)	Continuous variable
Partnered Status	1 = Partnered married mother, 0 = Sole mother
<i>Employment Characteristics</i>	
Respondent's occupation type	Categorical variable with 3 dummy variables 1 = Professional/administrative, 0 = Other 1 = Trade or clerical, 0 = Other 1 = Manual labour/sales, 0 = Other 1 = Unemployed or not in labour market, 0 = Other Base Category for EARNINGS analysis: Manual labour/sales Base category for HOUSEHOLD and FULL INCOME analyses: Unemployed or not in labour market

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

The variables listed in Table 8.2 include parental background, personal characteristics, number and age of children and also the respondent's occupational

and partnered status. These variables are selected, first, because based on the analysis previously undertaken in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, they provide a broad range of possible explanatory factors. Second, these variables reflect, in general terms, the variables commonly used in research on the labour market participation of sole mothers (see Raymond 1986; Ross & Saunders 1990; Mitchell 1992; Harris & Edin 2000; Gray et al. 2002).

## 8.6 Results

The analyses presented here, initially examine the mean variable differences between the sole and the married mothers. In Table 8.3 the means and standard deviations of all variables are presented comparatively for the sole and married mothers and also for the entire sample. The values of the variables based on the use of the square root of household size (SQRT) and the OECD (New) (OECDN) equivalence scales are reported separately. Due to the restricted nature of the sample in the EARNINGS model, the explanatory variables outlined in Table 8.3 relate to the full sample models, HOUSEHOLD and FULL INCOME, only. The factors related to material well-being in each of the three alternate measures of well-being are then examined using a series of OLS regression models detailed in Tables 8.4 to 8.8.

### 8.6.1 Variable Description

As shown in Table 8.3, the absolute value of the three measures of material well-being rises with their level of complexity. EARNINGS has the smallest annual mean value at \$20,452, followed by HOUSEHOLD at \$26,589 using the square root equivalence scale and \$25,678 using the OECD scale (new). The broadest measure, FULL INCOME, has the largest annual mean value of either \$50,907 or \$49,487 depending on the equivalence scale used. These rising values make intuitive sense as each measure contains an ever more comprehensive list of material well-being components. The disparity between the material well-being of the sole and married mothers also increases with the indicator's complexity. The sole mothers record a higher mean income on the first measure but in the second equivalised measure, household mean income reduces for the sole mothers but not for the married mothers. Sole mothers also report slightly poorer health than the married mothers.

**Table 8.3: Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables**

Indicator	Sole Mother (n = 141)		Married Mother (n = 438)		All Mothers (n = 579)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
EARNINGS	23837.22	14665.25	19439.69	15006.86	20451.72	15023.70
HOUSEHOLD SQRT	17022.82	11082.48	29668.42	14997.74	26588.92	15143.32
HOUSEHOLD OECDN	18299.93	11978.67	28053.07	14358.95	25677.95	14428.87
FULL INCOME SQRT	36220.61	13527.46	55634.44	21594.36	50906.72	21547.14
FULL INCOME OECDN	38738.23	14632.95	52947.65	20949.35	49487.32	20516.76
Age	37.64	8.04	36.76	6.51	36.97	6.92
Age squared	1480.76	600.74	1393.26	489.72	1414.57	519.76
Education	12.33	2.26	12.83	2.09	12.71	2.14
Health	1.86	.84	1.67	.72	1.72	.75
Occupation – Professional/ Administrative	.23	.42	.30	.46	.28	.45
Occupation – Trade/Clerical	.23	.42	.26	.44	.25	.43
Occupation – Manual/Sales	.13	.34	.08	.27	.09	.29
Australian Born	.81	.39	.81	.40	.81	.40
Overseas Born – English Speaking Country	.13	.34	.10	.30	.11	.31
Father Australian Born	.67	.47	.67	.47	.67	.47
Father Overseas Born	.16	.36	.16	.37	.16	.37
English Speaking Country						
Mother's Education – Post School Qualification	.25	.43	.22	.42	.23	.42
Mother's Education – Complete Secondary	.18	.38	.15	.36	.16	.36
Father's Occupation – Prof/administrative	.42	.50	.42	.49	.42	.49
Father's Occupation – Trade/Clerical	.30	.46	.37	.48	.36	.48
Number of Children	2.28	1.19	2.38	1.04	2.36	1.08
Children under 6	.25	.50	.64	.75	.55	.71
Children 6–12 years	.94	.92	.99	.96	.98	.95
Partnered Status	0.0		1.00		.76	.43

Data source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

In the explanatory variables, sole and married mothers are roughly similar, with the exception of number and ages of children. While the married mothers are slightly younger, have higher educational levels, have fathers with a trade or clerical occupation, are more likely to be employed<sup>10</sup> and, within that, more likely to be in professional or managerial occupations, these differences are not large. With regard to children, however, in line with ABS (1997a) and other data, the sole mother households have fewer children overall and are less likely to have a pre-school child.

<sup>10</sup> As reported in Chapter 7, the sole mother employment rate of 60 per cent is higher than the current ABS (2000a) estimate of 56 per cent. These data imply that employed sole mothers may be slightly over-represented in this sample. As previously noted, while this data difference is unlikely to significantly affect the analysis, it should be borne in mind when interpreting the results.

## 8.6.2 Analysis 1: EARNINGS

As indicated in Table 8.4, the fit of the EARNINGS model is relatively low, explaining only around 13 per cent of the mothers' material well-being<sup>11</sup>.

**Table 8.4: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Earnings from Employment**

	Annual Earnings	(s.e.)	Significance
Age	1391.04	1073.20	.196
Age squared	-17.76	13.94	.204
Education	203.38	451.32	.653
Occupation – Professional/administrative	12792.32	2564.89	.000
Occupation – Trade/clerical	4085.77	2370.04	.086
Health	-1762.94	1100.29	.110
Australian Born	1176.21	3638.31	.747
Overseas Born – English-speaking country	2028.36	4887.19	.678
Father Australian Born	-2144.75	2746.53	.435
Father Overseas Born – English-speaking country	-3250.85	3889.65	.404
Father's Occupation – Professional/administrative	226.42	2158.54	.917
Father's Occupation – Trades/clerical	-1477.32	2211.65	.505
Mother's Education – Post school qualification	-859.26	1880.89	.648
Mother's Education – Complete secondary	448.91	2193.83	.838
Number of Children under 18	21.10	936.88	.982
Children under 6	-1044.62	1565.27	.505
Children 6–12	-731.92	1061.88	.491
Partnered Status	-5469.74	1872.65	.004
Intercept	-11813.46		
N*	365		
Adjusted R2	.13		

\*Only those respondents currently employed included.  
Data Source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

Within this measure only two factors, occupational and partnered status, are significantly influential. Respondents in professional/administrative occupations are likely to earn \$12,792 per annum more than those in manual or sales occupations. This difference may be explained not only by the higher salaries attached to these occupations but also the greater likelihood that those in higher status employment work longer or more regular hours. These differences also probably relate to the lower rates of part-time work among Australian sole mothers. Duncan and Edwards (1999) point to the social support for mothering as an explanation for the influence of partnered status on mothers' work modes. In countries such as Australia, where social support for mothers' employment is low, partnered mothers, due to greater

<sup>11</sup> Separate analyses for sole and married mothers find a similar pattern of results as reported here. The same variables are significant in material well-being for the sole and married mothers across all 3 measures with the exception of education. Education is significant for married mothers in the HOUSEHOLD or FULL INCOME measures, but not significant for the sole mothers on either

access to informal childcare, are better placed to take up part-time work. In line with domestic responsibilities, however, this work is usually ‘short part-time’ of less than 20 hours per week, often poorly paid and with low job security. For sole mothers, even where such work is possible, the low wages often do not compensate for the extra financial and time costs involved.

### 8.6.3 Analysis 2: HOUSEHOLD

The second OLS regression uses the equivalent household income (HOUSEHOLD) measures. These measures explain a much higher level of variance, accounting for 34 per cent of household material well-being using the HOUSEHOLD SQRT measure and 32 per cent using HOUSEHOLD OECDN. The number of significant factors is also higher, with the specific variables and level of significance almost identical across the two HOUSEHOLD measures. Table 8.5 details regression coefficients for HOUSEHOLD SQRT and Table 8.6 details those of HOUSEHOLD OECDN.

**Table 8.5: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Equivalent Household Income (Square Root equivalence scale)**

	Annual Household Income	(s.e.)	Significance
Age	234.07	681.67	.731
Age Squared	.00	9.17	1.000
Education Level	804.39	291.71	.006
Occupation – Professional/administrative	11676.55	1470.69	.000
Occupation – Trade/clerical	4665.87	1378.61	.001
Occupation – Sales/manual	3625.38	1946.81	.063
Health	-1005.93	708.26	.156
Australian Born	4234.29	2387.73	.077
Overseas Born – English-speaking country	5012.21	3315.22	.131
Father Australian Born	-2222.95	1792.96	.216
Father Overseas Born – English-speaking country	-3224.38	2581.53	.212
Father’s Occupation – Professional/administrative	1251.30	1415.02	.377
Father’s Occupation – Trades/Clerical	134.85	1422.46	.925
Mother’s Education – Post School qual.	741.12	1297.06	.568
Mother’s Education – Complete Secondary	636.04	1477.40	.667
Number of Children under 18	-2385.20	615.43	.000
Children under 6	-875.94	989.02	.376
Children 6–12	-651.17	715.42	.363
Partnered Status	12278.77	1264.43	.000
Intercept	11544.65		
N	579		
Adjusted R2	.34		

Data Source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

variable. These results are not reported here as the small number of sole mother cases ( $n = 141$ ) impacts on the reliability of the results

**Table 8.6: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Equivalent Household Income (OECD (new) equivalence scale)**

	Annual Household Income	(s.e.)	Significance
Age	233.20	660.41	.724
Age Squared	-.05	8.88	.995
Education Level	783.47	282.61	.006
Occupation – Professional/administrative	11410.78	1424.82	.000
Occupation – Trade/clerical	4581.61	1335.61	.001
Occupation – Sales/manual	3419.68	1886.09	.070
Health	-947.40	686.17	.168
Australian Born	4197.59	2313.26	.070
Overseas Born – English-speaking country	4565.63	3211.82	.156
Father Australian Born	-2287.38	1737.04	.188
Father Overseas Born – English-speaking country	-3007.93	2501.02	.230
Father's Occupation – Professional/administrative	1306.28	1370.88	.341
Father's Occupation – Trade/clerical	235.34	1378.10	.864
Mother's Education – Post school qualification	590.64	1256.61	.639
Mother's Education – Complete secondary	589.89	1431.32	.680
Number of Children under 18	-2689.97	596.23	.000
Children under 6	-829.04	958.17	.387
Children 6–12	-621.21	693.11	.370
Partnered Status	9400.17	1224.99	.000
Intercept	11052.95		
N	579		
Adjusted R2	.32		

Data Source: NLC Survey 1996/97.

As can be seen, occupational status remains significant in both HOUSEHOLD measures. Mothers employed in a professional/administrative occupation or in a clerical/trade occupation have significantly higher HOUSEHOLD income than mothers who are unemployed or not in the labour market. However, being in a sales/manual labour job does not result in a significantly higher level of household material well-being for mothers. This result indicates that for sole mothers especially, given the additional costs faced from labour market participation such as potential losses to social security entitlement, the income generated by lower occupational level employment is unlikely to justify the time lost to parenting and household tasks.

In line with the predicted higher HOUSEHOLD income for those with professional or administrative occupations, education level is also significant. Each additional year of education is likely to result in \$804 additional HOUSEHOLD SQRT income per annum and \$783 per annum HOUSEHOLD OECDN income. The total number of children is negatively associated with HOUSEHOLD income level, with each child likely to result in \$2,385 less per annum on the HOUSEHOLD SQRT measure

and \$2,690 less on the HOUSEHOLD OECDN measure. The age group of the child, however, is not significant, indicating that it is parenting responsibilities per se, rather than parenting of younger children, that impact negatively on HOUSEHOLD income.

The mother's partnered status is also highly significant. Depending on the measure used, being partnered is positively associated with material well-being by an extra \$12,279 or \$9,400 per annum. The impact of a mother's partnered status is, therefore, similar to that of holding a professional/administrative occupation, and is between double and treble that of being in clerical or trade employment. Thus, in this measure, although material well-being is increased in a high or mid-level occupation, when total equivalised household income is taken into account, sole mothers, regardless of their employment status, have significantly lower levels of material well-being than do married mothers. Child support and social security income support payments do not significantly reduce this disparity. *For mothers, therefore, the material benefit of a partner is likely to far outweigh the economic value of labour force participation.*

#### **8.6.4 Analysis 3: FULL INCOME**

The final OLS regression utilises the broadest and most complex measures of material well-being, FULL INCOME. Table 8.7 and Table 8.8 detail the coefficients of FULL INCOME SQRT and FULL INCOME OECDN respectively. While again the measure provides a good fit, and again the specific variables are very similar across both FULL INCOME measures, the results differ substantially from those of the less comprehensive measures. First, the influence of family background is significant for the first time. Respondents whose father held a professional/administrative position are likely earn more than \$4000 per annum extra in FULL INCOME than those with fathers working in sales or manual positions. This result indicates that socio-economic background may be predictive of material well-being, but only for those from higher-level backgrounds. Under this measure, the impact of the household's number of children has also risen. Each extra child is now likely to result in more than \$5,000 per annum reduction in FULL INCOME material well-being. The value of education has also risen, to over \$2,000 for each additional year of education, under these measures.

**Table 8.7: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Equivalent Full Income (Square Root of Household Size Equivalence Scale)**

	Annual Full Income	(s.e.)	Significance
Age	-447.87	961.09	.641
Age Squared	15.67	12.92	.226
Education Level	2049.74	411.28	.000
Occupation – Professional/administrative	283.08	2073.52	.891
Occupation – Trade/clerical	-7552.88	1943.70	.000
Occupation – Sales/manual	-9988.43	2744.80	.000
Health	-1471.93	998.57	.141
Australian Born	5845.76	3366.45	.083
Overseas Born – English-speaking country	8788.49	4674.12	.061
Father Australian Born	420.05	2527.89	.868
Father Overseas Born – English-speaking country	-929.22	3639.70	.799
Father's Occupation – Professional/administrative	4398.79	1995.03	.028
Father's Occupation – Trade/clerical	1834.66	2005.53	.361
Mother's Education – Post school qualification	2120.78	1828.73	.247
Mother's Education – Complete secondary	2813.29	2082.99	.177
Number of Children under 18	-5049.78	867.69	.000
Children under 6	1581.51	1394.41	.257
Children 6–12	-143.58	1008.67	.887
Partnered Status	18852.20	1782.71	.000
Intercept	31054.41		
N	579		
Adjusted R2	.36		

Data Source: NLC 1996/97

**Table 8.8: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Equivalent Full Income (OECD New Equivalence Scale)**

	Annual Full Income	(s.e.)	Significance
Age	-510.91	934.61	.585
Age Squared	16.27	12.57	.196
Education Level	2006.46	399.95	.000
Occupation – Professional/administrative	417.02	2016.38	.836
Occupation – Trades/clerical	-7345.39	1890.13	.000
Occupation – Sales/manual	-9977.13	2669.16	.000
Health	-1468.35	971.05	.131
Australian Born	5676.06	3273.68	.083
Overseas Born – English-speaking country	8017.80	4545.31	.078
Father Australian Born	255.26	2458.23	.917
Father Overseas Born – English-speaking country	-825.22	3539.39	.816
Fathers Occupation – Professional/administrative	4487.44	1940.05	.021
Fathers Occupation – Trade/clerical	1927.54	1950.26	.323
Mothers Education – Post-school qualification	1975.75	1778.33	.267
Mothers Education – Complete secondary	2798.43	2025.58	.168
Number of Children under 18	-5515.11	843.78	.000
Children under 6	1488.74	1355.99	.273
Children 6–12	-146.23	980.87	.882
Partnered Status	13707.01	1733.58	.000
Intercept	31752.58		
N	579		
Adjusted R2	.33		

Data Source: NLC 1996/97



The most dramatic findings, however, relate to occupational and partnered status. First, the inclusion of non-employed adult time has significantly altered the impact of the mother's occupational status on the level of household material well-being. Under either FULL INCOME SQRT, or FULL INCOME OECDN, being employed in a professional or administrative position is no longer statistically significant. However, this value is significant for mothers employed in trades/clerical or sales manual occupations, but in a negative direction. Those employed in lower level positions earn significantly *less* per annum in FULL INCOME than do those mothers who are unemployed or not in the labour force. Thus, if we use a measure of well-being that includes the actual value of parents' time, households are not better off when the mother is employed, regardless of occupation.

Even more significant is the strength of the influence of partnered status. On these indicators, being a sole mother is the largest predictor of a lower level of material well-being. Although here the equivalence scale used in the construction of the index results in a difference in FULL INCOME values, across both versions of the measure, the sole mother households remain substantially disadvantaged in FULL INCOME terms. Sole mother households are likely to receive \$18,852 under FULL INCOME SQRT and \$13,707 under FULL INCOME OECDN less FULL INCOME than the married mother households. Importantly, this negative connotation of being a sole mother is independent of family background, educational level, number and age of children and occupational status.

## **8.7 Material Well-Being in Context**

Two contrasting trends emerge from these analyses. First, as the complexity of the measure of material well-being increases, the predictive significance of the mother's labour market decreases. Second, partnered status has a similar but opposite effect. As the indicator comprehensiveness rises, so too does the negative implication of being a sole mother. From a positive indicator in EARNINGS, sole motherhood becomes a negative indicator once total equivalent household income is taken into account. The negative predictive power of sole mother status rises again in the broader FULL INCOME measure of material well-being.

This sensitivity of mothers' partnered and occupational/employment status to the way material well-being is measured is a key result. As argued earlier, there is good reason to regard FULL INCOME as a more robust measure than either EARNINGS or HOUSEHOLD. The measure captures the broader components of material well-being, including time, housing and non-cash benefits, as well as the simpler measures of direct monies received. As a more comprehensive and complex indicator, FULL INCOME is, correspondingly, a better predictor of comparative inequality than money income alone, and it may be rationally argued that it provides a more accurate reflection of actual material well-being status than the other measures. Thus, in a similar manner to Richardson and Travers (1993), this analysis finds that sole mothers are substantially more disadvantaged than their equivalent household money income would suggest. While the severity of this disadvantage varies depending on which equivalence scale is used in constructing the FULL INCOME measure, the disparity in FULL INCOME between the sole and married mothers remains stark.

More crucially, these results taken in combination clearly indicate that for sole mothers, at least, labour force participation and material well-being are not necessarily the same thing. While, in simple respondent income terms, earnings are predictive of material well-being, when mothers' households are ranked by FULL INCOME as distinct from equivalent HOUSEHOLD INCOME, a very different picture of the efficacy of mothers' employment is obtained. Although the value of the indexes of HOUSEHOLD and FULL INCOME vary widely within, as well as between, the two groups of mothers, it is obvious that, on this measure, the major factor predicting the level of material well-being available to a family is the partnered status of the mother, *not* her labour market participation. These results are also in line with the previously discussed American data, indicating that work, as opposed to welfare receipt, does not necessarily make sole mothers significantly better off (Edin & Lein 1997; Harris & Edin 2000; Bauman 2000). The results also validate the views of Australian sole mothers, expressed in qualitative studies, that part-time and or low paying paid jobs may result in greater financial hardship for their families than not taking up any paid work at all (Cowling 1998; Swinbourne 2000). Even more critically, in HOUSEHOLD and FULL INCOME, the partnered status of the mother is the variable with the most explanatory power. This suggests that the highly disadvantaged position of sole mother families is related

fundamentally *to the soleness of their parenting*, rather than personal characteristics such as lower educational levels or indeed, labour market participation.

## 8.8 Answering the Question

While current Australian sole parent policy is firmly turned towards labour market solutions, this analysis raises important questions about the efficacy, in terms of material well-being, of this direction. Sole parenthood and poverty are obviously linked, but the cause of this interaction is not necessarily a lack of labour market work. In the analyses reported in this chapter, the major explanation for the glaring disparities in material well-being between mother households is the partnered status of the mother. Taken in combination, these results challenge the predominant view of the relative worth of employment on mothers' material well-being. The assumption contained within the broader political welfare reform discourse that obtaining work, any work, is a desirable and beneficial goal for sole mother families is, therefore, contested.

While higher rates of employment by sole mothers may be desirable from the perspective of reducing government expenditure, or from the moral standpoint of reducing welfare dependence, the material well-being benefits of such work, at least for sole mothers, are questionable. Based on these results, increasing the numbers and proportions of sole mothers in employment is unlikely to make any real difference to their overall position of disadvantage. The glaring disparities in the material well-being of married and sole mothers families are unlikely to be solved purely by labour market solutions. These findings have implications for welfare reform policies that will probably intensify the work requirements on sole parents. It is clear that work and material well-being are not straightforward concepts for either sole mother households or social policy makers.

In the next chapter, the results from this chapters' analysis are drawn together with those from Chapters Five, Six and Seven, to answer the overarching question of this thesis.

## Chapter Nine: Mothers' Relationship to the Labour Market

### 9.0 Introduction

How then, in the reforming Australian welfare state, is the primary role of women with dependent children viewed? Is it as mothers or workers? In social policy terms, the answer appears to be dependent on partnered status. O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) point to contestation around women's roles and the extent to which women's employment, unlike men's, should be the result of individual 'choice' as a defining feature of social policy in 'liberal' welfare regimes. In the Australian 'liberal' welfare state, this contestation results in family policies that increasingly encourage married mothers to see themselves primarily as mothers, sitting alongside welfare reform policies that deem the labour market to be the appropriate source of sole mother family support. This contradictory amalgam of welfare reform and family policy dichotomises motherhood along partnered status lines. Mothers who are, or become, unpartnered, are recast as essentially workers, albeit inadequate ones. The resultant policy schism is reconciled within welfare reform discourse by negatively comparing sole to married mothers, with the major pejorative judgement revolving around mothers' relationship to the labour market. Sole mothers' consistently lower rates of labour market activity are interpreted as causally connected to high levels of welfare dependence.

So, given the evidence, does the relationship of sole mothers with the labour market differ from that of married mothers? This study's core question is the focus of this chapter. Welfare reform discourse simplistically portrays sole and married mothers as differently situated within family and welfare policy. However, as the results from the previous three chapters indicate, the answer is neither simple nor straightforward. Underlying the question are ideological debates about the 'correct' role of mothers, the appropriate interaction of the state and the family in a 'liberal' market economy, and mothers' own belief systems about the compatibility of motherhood with market activity. More practically, this question encompasses the feasibility of combining

motherhood and paid employment and the impact of that employment on the household's level of material well-being. The role of social policy is also important. Social policy operates to define and interpret the complex interaction of the ideological and concrete aspects of mothers' relationship with the labour market. As Bryson (1992) contends, social policy plays a major role in the 'lived' effects' of discourse.

To address these issues, this chapter draws together the results from the analysis of the three sub-questions relating to the ideological, practical, and financial dimensions of mothers' relationship to the labour market. Based on these analyses, an explanatory model for the differences and similarities in sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market is proposed.

## **9.1 Framing Mothers' Relationship with the Labour Market**

At the core of the contradiction in welfare and family policy is the increasing ideological dominance of neo-liberalism in Australian social and economic policy. Under this ideological influence, as Baker (1997) argues, economic policy is in effect driving social policy. Approached from this direction, social policy aimed at reducing welfare dependency translates into an attempt to move the source of an individual's income from the public to the private sphere or from the state to the market. Policy solutions are, therefore, framed in terms of moving recipients away from income support into self-reliance via market work. Australians of working age, regardless of gender or parenting responsibilities, are the firm focus of these policies. In this framework, poverty reduction is not a direct aim in itself but, rather, is assumed to flow automatically from reduced welfare dependence and greater economic self-reliance. In the case of sole mothers, it is sole mothers themselves, not sole mother family poverty that is deemed to be in need of policy attention.

As such, welfare dependency as a social concern operates to bring the *source* of an individual's material well-being into focus as a policy issue. In the neo-liberalist context of welfare reform, all material well-beings are not equal. Material well-being derived from either the market or the private family is regarded as inherently superior to that gained via state support. The endorsed advantages of privately delivered material well-being are two-fold. Most obviously, the State benefits via reduced

public outlays, but the moral perspective appears equally important. Privately accessed income is seen as increasing individual independence and autonomy, and is hailed by welfare reform commentators such as Mead (1999) as the antidote to the social and individual negatives of welfare dependence. Therefore, while sole and married mothers undertake essentially the same parenting role, their differing main source of material well-being – that is, from the State rather than the private family – is at the core of their different social policy placement. Within this discourse, it is the limited nature of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market that is the problem.

Yet, the evidence from *this* study suggests that the relationship with the labour market is much more complicated for sole mothers than it is for married mothers. For sole mothers, factors other than labour market aspirations or value systems around motherhood and paid work appear to inhibit the level of labour force activity. That is, sole mothers' employment status might be argued to mirror their ability to access and participate in the labour market rather than directly reflecting their participation choice. This contention is supported by Gray et al.'s (2002) conclusion that only one-third of the employment gap between Australian sole and married mothers can be attributed to differences in social and personal characteristics, with the other two-thirds ascribed to the differing impact of these variables on sole and married mothers. We might conclude then, that factors *other* than personal or social characteristics, belief systems, or attitudes to labour market activity, are operating to constrain sole mothers' relationship to the labour market.

## 9.2 The Domain of Sole Motherhood

What is it that constrains sole mothers' relationship to the labour market? The results of this thesis strongly suggest that the soleness of sole motherhood is likely to be such a factor. As demonstrated throughout this analysis, the decision to undertake or forgo workforce activity is, for all mothers, a complex task involving the interweaving of mothers' belief systems as to what constitutes good motherhood, the practical realities of reconciling paid employment and the work of parenting, and the relative financial outcomes of that work to family material well-being. The mother's own level of labour force skills and experience, plus the local job market, also impact each of these dimensions. Critically, the range and mix of aspects that impact on

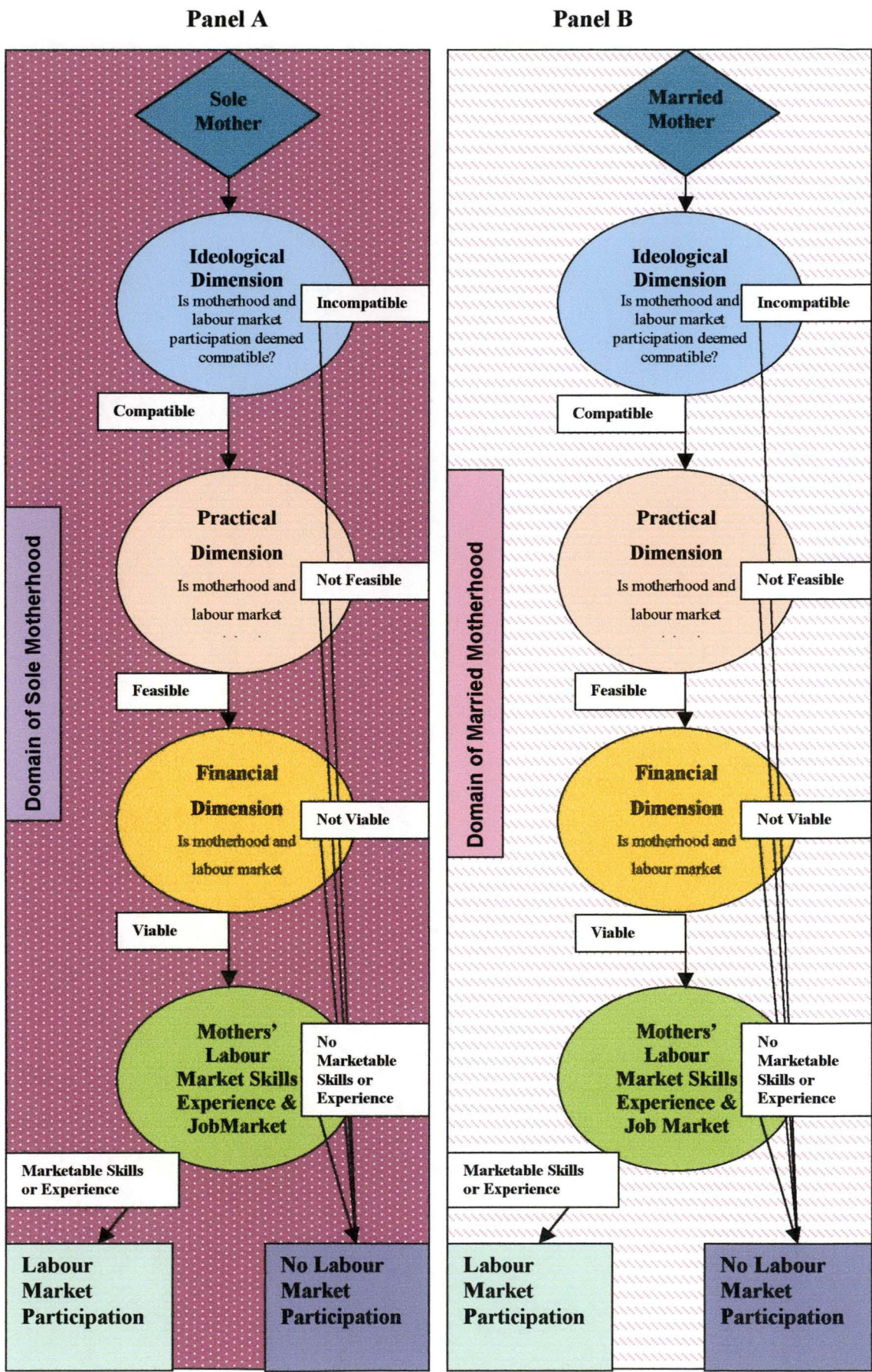
labour market decisions are very similar for sole and married mothers. For both groups, motherhood is the central defining feature of their relationship to the labour market. Yet, despite this core similarity, the domains in which sole and married mothers negotiate these determinations differ. The multifaceted, interconnected web of factors affecting labour market decisions are, themselves, interwoven with, and influenced by, the day-to-day reality of either sole or married motherhood. The differing social, political and ideological environments in which sole mothers negotiate their labour market decisions can be termed the *domain of sole motherhood*.

This vital difference, within the core of motherhood similarity, is demonstrated in the Domain of Motherhood Model depicted in Figure 9.1. The exact replication of the pathways to labour market activity displayed in the model's two panels emphasises the similarity in sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market. As demonstrated, all mothers first negotiate the ideological dimension. In most situations, it is only if a mother considers that market work is compatible with her mothering will she proceed to determining if employment is a practically feasible option. The financial viability of such work will then be weighed against the costs to the household of that employment. Finally, a mothers' ability to access paid work may be restricted by the consistency of her own skills and experience with her local labour market. Any labour market deficits are, in turn, likely linked to the labour market penalties associated with mothers' primary caring role. Thus, for both sole and married mothers, the pathway to labour market activity is the same and intimately connected to the mothering role.

Critically, despite this similarity in process, the *environment* in which the two groups of mothers make their employment decisions is strikingly different. As shown in the model, while married mothers negotiate their labour market relationship within the domain of married motherhood, for sole mothers these same negotiations are undertaken within the very different personal, social, and political *reality* of sole motherhood. For sole mothers, already complex labour market decisions are further shaped, complicated and influenced by the soleness of their motherhood. Negotiating a relationship with the labour market, is consequently, manifestly more problematic and complicated when undertaken within the domain of sole motherhood, than from within the domain of married motherhood.



Figure 9.1: The Domain of Motherhood and Market Activity Decisions





Moreover, the impact of operating within the personal social and political environment of the domain of sole motherhood is evident across each dimension of the labour market relationship. Quintessentially, what the domain of motherhood model is demonstrating is that each dimension of the sole mothers' labour market relationship – the ideological, the practical and the financial – is, itself, enveloped within the lived experience of being a sole mother in the Australian 'liberal' welfare state. This core difference is demonstrated within the model by the density of the surrounding *domain* of motherhood.

The evidence from this thesis informs the Domain of Motherhood model. In each of the major dimensions of mothers' relationship with the labour market analysed in the preceding three chapters, the soleness of sole motherhood emerges as a significant explanatory factor. In line with Vickery's (1977) proposition, the sole mothers are, comparatively, both income poor and time poor, compared to the married mothers. Basically, the nature of sole parenthood means that sole mothers have only one set of adult hours to allocate to parenting, household and market work. This simple but concrete aspect of sole motherhood has widespread ramifications. Given that effective family household functioning requires inputs of both time and income, it is impossible to simultaneously increase parenting/household time *and* income from market work from the same *single* set of adult hours.

This relative income and time poverty is clearly reflected in all three dimensions of mothers' relationship to the labour market, as shown in Figure 9.1. The first point is the disjunction between the sole mothers' lower rates of labour market participation and their labour market aspirations and values around work force activity. As demonstrated in Chapters Six and Seven, not only are the sole mothers' attitudes towards combining work and mothering slightly *more* liberal than those of the married mothers, but the sole mothers are also *more* likely to be actively seeking work, less likely to be out of the labour market through maternal choice, and less happy with part-time hours than are the married mothers. Yet, while current employment status directly reflects the married mothers' belief system around combining motherhood and paid work, the same conclusion is not valid for the sole mothers. In combination, these data suggest that, for sole mothers, labour market aspirations do not, or cannot, translate as easily into employment realities. That is,

although sole mothers may wish to participate in the labour market at higher rates, the domain of sole motherhood impacts negatively on their ability to do so.

The second point is that the impact of the differing domains of motherhood can be seen in the different income/time reality of sole and married mother households. The lack of a resident partners' household and parenting input in sole mother families appears to be influential here. In Chapter Eight, under the measure of material well-being that includes a value for parental time (FULL INCOME), the comparatively disadvantaged position of the sole mother households is substantially increased over that found in the measures not including a value for parental time. Furthermore, as shown in Chapter Seven, having another parent resident in the household increases home-based childcare availability and, therefore, employment options for the married mothers. As proposed by Ford (1998), having a partner can be taken as a proxy of wider family support. Not only can married mothers draw on their partner or in-laws for childcare, but pooled household earnings also give greater scope to meet childcare and other workforce costs. In contrast, sole mothers must try to balance their family's need for both income and time while also contending, mostly alone, with mother/worker related issues such as access to suitable childcare. Mothering within the domain of sole motherhood means that achieving a practical real life balance between household time and money budgets is both different and more problematic for sole mothers than it is for married mothers. The result, especially for sole mothers with younger children, is that fulfilling parenting time needs in sole mother families may require the use of economic strategies that substitute income support payments for employment income.

The third point is the marital separation event itself, which adds a further explanatory facet for the differences in sole and married mothers' decisions around labour market activity. As shown in Chapter Six, significant proportions of mothers discontinue or reduce their labour market activity in the period immediately following the separation of their marital relationship. This finding is not surprising given that the married to sole mother transition is usually a period of dramatic and emotional change for both the parent and her children. These data do not address the reasons that mothers reduce their employment activity. Nonetheless, the adjustment to a new family terrain and the day-to-day sole responsibility for children probably forces a re-prioritisation of roles. Within Duncan and Edwards' (1999) concept of gendered

moral rationalities it is proposed that, for many sole mothers, rational ‘choices’ about labour market participation change in the post-separation period. Whatever a mother’s previous orientation to the labour market, workforce activity may no longer be deemed compatible with mothering within the domain of sole motherhood. For many *new* sole mother families, this situation effectively means that market income is replaced by income support payments for some period after the marital separation.

The fourth point is that the financial viability of a mother’s labour market participation differs between the sole and married domains of motherhood. As demonstrated in Chapter Eight, a mother’s partnered status and level of household material well-being are strongly linked. On all of the three measures of material well-being considered, the partnered status of the mother is the variable with the largest explanatory power. Moreover, the influence of partnered status rises in line with the complexity of the material well-being measure. On the EARNINGS measure (the least complex measure) the sole mothers have lower levels of labour market participation, but higher earnings amongst those in the labour force. On the two more inclusive measures, however, the impact of partnered status is increasingly influential in the other direction. On both the HOUSEHOLD and FULL INCOME measures, holding all other variables constant, being a sole mother per se rather than a married mother per se explains the largest degree of the differential in levels of material well-being. In particular, the extra components included in the construction of the FULL INCOME measure of material well-being highlight the complexity and multiplicity of the negative impact on material well-being of being a sole mother. Finally, the combined impact of parenting within the domain of sole motherhood, outlined in the previous four points, acts to limit the range of employment options open to sole mothers. In addition, the lower overall educational levels and the younger age at first birth of the sole mothers compared to the married mothers, detailed in Chapter Five, is likely to further exacerbate the labour market constraints of sole mothers, negatively impacting on the skills and experience they bring to the labour market.

In summary, while sole and married mothers must both resolve the ideological fit between motherhood and market activity, the practical feasibility, financial viability, and labour market reality of workforce participation, the context in which those decisions are made, are very different and depend on the mothers’ partnered status.

The differing domains of motherhood, sole and married – that is, the differing personal, social and political reality of being a sole or married mother within the Australian welfare state – are therefore an essential element in any explanation of the differing relationship of Australian sole and married mothers to the labour market.

### **9.3 The Domain of Sole Motherhood and Welfare Reform**

The Australian welfare reform process makes determinations around market work within the domain of sole motherhood even more fraught with difficulty. The transition from married to sole mother within the reforming Australian welfare state radically alters the social, political and ideological environment in which a mother undertakes her parenting role. Policy attitudes to a household's need for parenting time provide a clear example of this altered environment. Although, the need for parenting time emerges in this study as a significant factor in sole mothers' engagement with the labour market, the essential element of social policy change under welfare reform is a reduction in the priority given to sole mothers' parenting time. In stark contrast to the political rhetoric accompanying 'family strengthening', social policies such as the 'baby bonus', and Family Tax Benefit B, discussion around the impact of parenting on sole mothers' capacity for market work is muted. Paid work may be valorised within welfare reform rhetoric, but assumptions of unmitigated good are questionable when viewed from any perspective that defines parenting as a vital and time-consuming household resource.

Also unacknowledged in debates about labour market activity for sole mothers is the reality of Australian social support for caring. While market work is increasingly seen as the answer to public dependency, parenting responsibility remains a private concern. The extra difficulties faced by sole mothers in trying to reconcile private child raising with reducing public dependency is exemplified by the differences found in this thesis' data relating to childcare. As detailed in Chapter Six, sole mothers report more childcare problems and much higher usage of out-of-household childcare, particularly from relatives living elsewhere, than do married mothers. Yet, while welfare reform may cast mothers as essentially workers, this policy shift has not, to date, been backed by any additional social resources to assist sole mothers in meeting their childcare needs. Indeed, as noted since the first NLC survey in 1996/97, federal government childcare expenditure has been dramatically reduced.

These arguments, however, do not claim that well-paid, secure and rewarding employment will not benefit sole mother families in the aggregate. The higher levels of material well-being for those mothers in professional or administrative positions found in the EARNINGS and HOUSEHOLD models in Chapter Eight demonstrate that it would. Also, as shown in Chapter Six, sole mothers appear aware of such possible benefits because they are even more likely to be seeking this type of work than married mothers. Research evidence also indicates that market work can bring a range of direct and indirect benefits for sole mothers. Harris and Edin's (2000) data, for example, show that mothers with higher average wage rates and hours of work at the time of leaving welfare are far more likely to remain off welfare payment into the future. Other research suggests that being employed improves the lives of sole mothers in more intangible ways. These include: extending the range of interpersonal networks; increasing better employment opportunities; increasing life satisfaction; raising self-esteem; providing greater time management and coping skills; expanding the availability of credit, and improving housing options (Bryson et al. 1997; McKendrick 1998; Richardson 1999; Baumann 2000). Yet, while employment can undoubtedly provide benefits for sole mothers, as previously discussed, labour market activity also includes considerable costs. Crucially, these extend beyond the easily measurable items such as: foregone benefits; childcare costs; the poverty trap of high effective marginal tax rates; and additional work-related costs. The less concrete costs such as: the loss of parenting time; variance of income; increased problems in complying with program rules; plus the personal, physical and social stresses inherent in reconciling the competing demands of paid work and parenting work also need to be considered. While sole mothers may want to participate in the labour force, the unique circumstances of sole mother households dictate that not just any work will do.

In particular, the employment option favoured by many Australian married mothers – part-time work – may not be a rational choice for sole mothers. As shown in Chapter Seven, sole mothers have lower rates of part-time work, but, if they do work part-time, are unhappier with their hours of work. The interaction between a household's dual need for income and unpaid work within the domain of sole motherhood may explain this difference. According to Becker (1981), if mothers are choosing family work over market work, then the value of that family work to the household must be higher than the rewards of market work. Alternatively, it may be that the costs of

undertaking market work are higher than the rewards. From the ideological, practical and financial perspectives, the time costs outweigh the (possible) financial gain. This alternative proposition seems especially apt for sole mother households. As confirmed in other research (see Funder et al. 1993; Harris et al. 1999; Swinbourne et al. 2000), the limited financial benefits from part-time work are unacceptable to many sole mothers when weighed against the non-financial costs to family well-being.

Thus, the argument that emerges from this thesis' analysis is not that labour market participation is either irreconcilable with, or inherently negative for, sole mother family life. Rather, the results suggest that higher labour market participation for sole mothers is not automatically a 'good' thing per se. The nature and type of work available, plus the social supports in place to enable sole mothers to meet the time as well as the income needs of their households, must be considered. Moreover, as clearly shown in Chapter Eight, labour market participation is no guarantee of increased material well-being for Australian sole mother households. Pushing sole mothers into work, any work, in the current Australian labour market, may just mean swapping reliance on income support for poorly paid, insecure work; or, more likely, an oscillation between the two. An inadequate income is inadequate whatever the source. The gain to sole mothers, or the state, even if defined in purely monetary terms, is highly questionable. Rather, as Baker (1996) contends, such social policy may merely create an underclass of low-paid, female workers who are sporadically and marginally employed. More practically, for sole mothers, endeavouring to provide quality parenting combined with an obligation of seeking paid work within a deregulated labour market that increasingly offers mostly insecure, low paid, low skill, with limited and/or highly variable hours, while also coping with scarce, unreliable and/or expensive childcare, does not necessarily present a better prospect than reliance on welfare payments.

### **9.3.1 Family and Welfare Reform Policy within the Domain of Sole Motherhood**

Current Australian family policy is clearly pro-natalist in intent and is informed by theories of motherhood such as those of Hakim (2000). As outlined in Chapter Four, Hakim contends that in this post-contraception and equal opportunity world, women are able to truly choose the mother/worker role that they most prefer. For the

majority of women, this preference is for employment options that accommodate the primacy of motherhood. Hakim's arguments obviously have some currency. Patterns of Australian womens' labour market participation and public attitudes towards mothers in the workforce outlined in Chapter Two support her claims. However, the pointed non-inclusion of sole mothers, who represent approximately one-fifth of families with dependent children, in either her analysis or the resultant policy framework is also instructive. As in Becker's Household Production Model, sole mothers do not 'fit' preference theory, and so are ignored in the theoretical and empirical analysis. In preference theory, all women are married and stay that way: or else they are dismissed as insignificant to the debate. When recently asked about the application of preference theory for unpartnered mothers (*The Europeans* 2002), Hakim replied that those who have to be financially independent would obviously 'want' full-time work but, anyway, they were a minority as *most* women are married. Thus, preference theory, while not directly antithetical to sole mothers, contains the same basic contradiction. 'Choices' about parenting work and market activity, deemed so important for married mothers, are effectively denied to sole mothers. Yet, as discussed, sole and married mothers' decisions about workforce participation incorporate a similar range and mix of economic, social and gender-based aspects. As indicated in Chapter Six, while there are within-group differences, both the sole and married mother groups hold values and attitudes that are more or less consistent with the dominant conventional orientation towards motherhood and paid work.

Further, the reported differences in mothers' attitudes on the compatibility of motherhood and market work vary primarily by social economic characteristics, *not* partnered status. As predicted by Duncan and Edward's (1999) theory of gendered moral rationalities, using indicators such as receipt of income support payments and/or public housing tenancy as a proxy for socio-economic status, those mothers (sole and married) from lower socio-economic groupings, are also those most likely to perceive paid work as detrimental to motherhood. This division is important given the data discussed in Chapter Three, suggesting that sole motherhood, both through marital breakdown or ex-nuptial birth, is a more common life event for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Birrell & Rapson 1998; Rowlingson & McKay 1998). Poorer mothers are likely to be over-represented among those to whom paid work and mothering are non-compatible, and also among those to whom welfare reform policies mostly apply.

The uneven impact of welfare reform is not coincidental. Sociologists from other liberal welfare regimes where similar policy frameworks have already been instituted, argue that the impetus for such policy division is not just economic, but stems from a concern to defend the integrity of existing social relations of production and reproduction. Thus, in Australian welfare reform debates, as previously seen in other 'welfare reformed' 'liberal' welfare states, welfare dependency is negatively defined by the criteria of productive work and/or family life. The valorisation of paid labour, the focus on welfare dependency, and the labour market deficits of unemployed adults, including sole mothers, allow a division to be made between welfare reform and the changes wrought within both the family and the labour force by economic restructuring (Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992; Gordon 1994; Mann & Roseneil 1994; Baker 1996; Moore 1996; Bacchi 1999; Fraser 2000). This division is underpinned by social policies that sanction and reinforce the dominant position of the traditional nuclear family, while designating sole parent families as a social problem. Thus, the sole/married mother policy contradiction functions to underline the emerging distinction in neo-liberalist ideology in terms of the way the state interacts with different family forms. O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) contend that the defining characteristic of a 'liberal' social policy regime is state intervention that is clearly subordinate to the market and the family. Within this framework, however, little attention is paid to the implications and consequences for *different* family and household types of the form of family most supported by public policy.

#### **9.4 The Domain of Motherhood and the Risk of Dependency**

The disparity in neo-liberalist family and welfare reform discourse leads to an ideological schism, not just on the defining role of mothers, but also the definition of what constitutes good motherhood within the Australian welfare state. Based on partnered status, and in line with changing discourse overseas, two contrasting models of 'good motherhood' are in operation. For married mothers, the 'good mother' model is one who puts aside 'selfish' personal ambitions and devotes herself to home and children. In complete contrast, under welfare reform, the 'good mother' model for sole mothers is one who finds a job by which she can support herself and her children (Bacchi 1999; Cohen & Bianchi 1999; Mead 1999). Thus, depending on whether or not a mother is partnered, participation in the labour market is touted as either the solution or the problem.



This unworkable policy logic is redeemed, in part, by the accompanying negative discourse around sole motherhood. For example, Rich's (2000) directly links poor educational outcomes and delinquency among boys with rising numbers of Australian sole mother families. Recent suggestions by the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, that parenting training be linked to welfare payments, also tie into this discourse (Wolfers & Leigh 2002). More usefully, the labelling of sole mothers as a 'problem' allows conservative reformers to avoid contradicting their other attacks on (married) mothers who do not stay home with their children. In this discourse, the widespread entry of mothers into the workforce is portrayed as contributing to contemporary social problems (see, for example, Saunders 2001; Cook 2002). Nowhere in these or similar articles are there calls for sole mothers to also be socially supported in their mothering roles.

More crucially, family structure is dynamic. On current indications, around 40 per cent of Australian registered marriages (ABS 2002a), and even higher rates of de facto relationships (McDonald 1995), will ultimately break down. Yet, within the competing directions of welfare reform and family policy, there seems little understanding that the vast majority of Australian sole mothers are, in fact, previously partnered mothers. While determinations of the appropriate mix of paid market work and unpaid parenting/household work may be a private matter for partnered mothers, these decisions take on a very different hue in the event of marital breakdown. The importance and validity given to a woman's mothering role will change along with her partnered status. A mother's private choice to withdraw from the labour market to care for her children, previously encouraged under family policy, is now a matter for social policy concern and regulation.

This incongruity clearly exposes the contradiction of the neo-liberal response to sole motherhood. As detailed in Chapter Six, a strong link exists between a mother's work history within marriage and her post-separation labour market behaviour. The post-separation family economy of sole mother households is directly connected to the a priori motherhood choices made in the context of the two-parent family. Importantly, the labour market penalties acquired from the prioritising of caregiving within the marriage are carried into the separation. Moreover, it is those mothers whose view and practice of motherhood conforms most closely to the traditional two-parent, single income family promoted in family values discourse, who are also

most likely to become 'welfare dependent' sole mothers. This evident correlation between the two types of mothers, the 'good' married mother who places family caring above her own labour market ambitions, and the 'bad' sole mother who does not participate in the labour market, is studiously ignored in policy debates around welfare reform.

Examining sole mothers' labour market participation from this angle raises serious questions about the nature of welfare dependency itself. The reality that all members of a society are dependent, whether it be on the market, the state or the family appears to be little understood. For while welfare reform is concerned about the dependency of sole mothers, it is *welfare* dependency – that is, public dependency, not dependency per se – which is perceived as so problematic. Under family policy, *private interfamilial dependency is actively encouraged*. The status of private dependency can also override, to some extent, the approbation associated with state support. Mothers partnered with men receiving unemployment or disability benefits, while also receiving a parenting payment, are not singled out as either a 'social problem', or for their lack of labour market activity in the same way as sole mothers. Their dependency, while still income-support reliant, correlates with established intra-family dependency. Thus, there is a chasm between the way public and private dependency is regarded in both welfare reform and family policy, although such dependencies are obviously interlinked.

Moreover, the causality flows from the private to the public. This evolutionary development of partnered mothers' private dependency to later public dependency raises questions about the likely outcome of the intersection of these competing and contradictory policy directions. Given that most sole mothers are formerly partnered mothers, the very family policy that now operates to encourage partnered mothers out of the labour market *must* also translate into later higher rates of welfare dependency by sole mothers. In this context, welfare dependency is just a natural, and totally foreseeable, consequence of partnered mothers' private dependency. Sole mothers' welfare dependency might, therefore, be regarded, not as linked to a labour market failing on the part of the sole mother, but as secondary dependency, founded on state encouragement of previous interfamilial dependency.

## 9.5 Summary

The domain of motherhood model offers an alternative perspective for viewing differences in labour market participation rates between Australian sole and married mothers. In particular, the model as demonstrated in the two panels of Figure 9.1, establishes that any explanation for disparities in mothers' level of labour market activity must go wider than the simplistic, individualised focus on 'welfare dependency' or sole mothers making the 'wrong choice' that is prominent in current welfare reform discourse. Rather, comparisons of mothers' labour market decisions need to be placed within the broader context of the social, political and economic environment in which such decisions are negotiated. Thus, sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market can be regarded on one level as the same, in that the dimensions of the relationship are identical for both groups and that motherhood is at the centre of each determination. On another more encompassing level, however, the relationship is very different. The environments within which such relationships are negotiated – the domains of sole or married motherhood – differ fundamentally. For sole mothers, each dimension of their labour market relationship is enveloped within the lived experience of being a sole mother within the Australian 'liberal' welfare state. Enforcing the entry of individual sole mothers into the labour market through mutual obligation and breach provisions is, therefore, unlikely to provide a 'solution' to the sole mother 'problem'.

A social policy concentration on sole mothers' lower labour force participation rates also operates to mask the disjunction between current family and welfare reform discourse. In these discourses, the appropriate labour market role for sole and married mothers is dichotomously dependent on partnered status. The inevitable translation of state-encouraged interfamilial dependency of married/partnered mothers into the later welfare dependency of sole mothers, however, appears unexamined within either discourse.

## **Chapter Ten: Policy Considerations and Alternative Visions: A Domain of Motherhood Approach**

### **10.0 Introduction**

What, then, is the best way to support sole mothers? Should social policy regard sole mothers as mothers or workers? This section examines policy considerations relating to these questions. As many of these have already been flagged throughout the thesis, they are not further elaborated here, but rather summarised into their two main aspects: the falseness of the policy dichotomy between sole and married mothers; and the impact of definitions of work, welfare and family within dominant political discourse. The discussion also canvasses an alternative policy prescription and areas of further research are identified. The thesis concludes by looking to the likely future direction of welfare reform in Australia as it relates to sole mothers' relationship to the labour market.

### **10.1 The Costs of Caring in the Domain of Sole Motherhood**

The unpaid work of raising children is central in both sole and married mothers' relationship with the labour market. As discussed, this caring work entails a range of labour market and life course costs associated with parenting that are applicable to all mothers. Low individual income, as shown in Chapter Eight, is a common factor in both the domain of sole and married motherhood. The lack or loss of a partner merely makes this manifest for sole mothers. The focus of social policy, therefore, might more productively be aimed towards assisting *all* mothers to be both mothers and workers, rather than concentrating on the 'problem' of sole motherhood.

The need for social policy that recognises the costs of caring for all mothers has already been raised as a priority in other reformed 'liberal' welfare regimes. These considerations are equally applicable to Australia. Cross-national comparisons, for example, find that sole mothers do best in terms of relative income and living standards in countries where they are treated in the same way as married mothers,

and where all mothers are supported to be both parents and paid workers (Millar & Ford 1996; Bradshaw 1998). This policy focus is far wider than the regular call (but little action) in Australia for 'family friendly' workplaces (Bachelard 2001). Rather, as Hobson (1994, p. 186) says, the question should be: what are the compensatory policies of caring in our society? While income support and childcare provision are vitally important, additional support options also need to be considered. These include: state-supported maternity/paternity leave; guaranteed access to good quality part-time work; parental leave to care for sick children; and childcare expenses as a legitimate tax deduction. Mothers who are full-time carers for their children also need support. Options here include: superannuation credits; family payments; training and retraining support; and assistance for eventual workforce re-entry via job placement, supported by an employer subsidy. Such policies would not only help reduce the distinctions between partnered and sole mothers, but would also increase the societal recognition of the validity and importance of unpaid caring work.

### **10.1.1 Definitions of Work and the Domain of Sole Motherhood**

Another recurring theme running through this thesis is the impact of ideologically-driven definitions of work and welfare. If the social definition of work was to include not just paid work but also that related to the care, nurture and support of children, then the dichotomy of work and welfare would be exposed as seriously flawed. Parenting work for sole mothers is not just a barrier to greater labour market activity, but is valid, socially valuable, complex, physical, time-consuming labour that is an essential prerequisite for family and societal functioning. The issue of labour market participation for sole mothers, therefore, cannot be addressed without also addressing children's needs and the role and place of caring work in sole mother households. Within a neo-liberalist framework, the limited definition of work as *paid work* skews the perspective. While the importance of the family is a regular topic of political rhetoric, the validity of unpaid work is restricted to that performed in two-parent families. The work that is required to make and maintain a sole parent family does not receive the same public recognition. For sole mothers, therefore, as suggested by Duncan and Edwards (1999, p. 295), the question to be asked is not how sole mothers can be encouraged to participate in the labour market, but 'what do sole mothers need to care well for their children without this conflicting with their ability to pursue economic independence?'

Additionally, as shown in this thesis, financial independence is not the only, or most important, consideration for mothers. Socially patterned moral guidelines around mothering operate to both constrain and facilitate sole mothers' level of labour market activity, just as they do for married mothers. Social policy, therefore, needs to respect social and cultural definitions of good motherhood, with the various self-understandings of the mother/worker identity being a fundamental consideration in 'welfare to work' social programs. Sole mothers, like partnered mothers, are not a homogenous group, and social policy should recognise the diversity in mothers' values towards combining of labour market activity and motherhood. Family social policy, I propose, would look very different if it recognised that: sole mother households are a valid and common family form; that all mothers might be sole mothers at some time during their life course; and that the value and labour of caring work is just as important, if not more important, in sole parent families as in two-parent households.

### **10.1.2 Policy Considerations Meet the Market Economy Reality**

For all their value, the implementation of 'motherhood supporting' policies, as described above, clash head-on with the dominant ideologies of the market economy. Such policies are untenable in a labour market environment which is increasingly divided into 'good-jobs' and 'bad-jobs', that continues to be segregated by gender differentials of pay and conditions, and which remains based on a division of labour that assigns women the primary responsibility for unpaid child rearing and caring work (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Such policies also conflict with the pro-natalist direction of recent family policy. The lukewarm political reception to proposals for a government-funded maternity leave scheme for working women (*Mercury* 12 December 2002, p. 1) indicates the level of support that any proposed 'mother friendly' social policy might receive. The business response was even less enthusiastic, with some commentators describing the very idea of paid maternity leave as 'insidious and dangerous' and an attempt to corporatise family life (Brass 2001, p.15). Within current family discourse, such 'mother friendly' policies, even for married mothers, are likely to be viewed as antithetical to the private and personal nature of the family. Additionally, in the current labour market, family friendly policies such as parental leave only benefit those workers in permanent, career-based employment. As shown earlier, sole mothers are under-represented among such

workers. Effective policy change, therefore, would require an altering of the discourse from one that dichotomises sole and married mothers into separate policy categories, to one that focuses on the economic vulnerability that flows from mothering. Discouragingly, in the prevailing neo-liberalist climate, a policy framework that includes support for married mothers to be *both* mothers and workers, let alone for sole mothers to do so, looks increasingly remote.

### 10.1.3 Easing the Domain of Sole Motherhood – A Parenting Contract?

Another option, perhaps more suited to this era of the possessive individual, is to review the way in which the costs of care are compensated within the private family. In the traditional two-parent model, the costs incurred by the primary carer are deemed to be remunerated through the financial and social support of the other parent. In essence, the traditional, gendered division of family labour is a *deal*, whereby women swap their unpaid caring work for ongoing interfamilial support. The equity of such a deal is, of course, highly questionable, but that is not the main issue here. Rather, the important point is the reciprocal nature of the arrangement and its long term and ongoing character. Not only will the other partner, via current support, pay for the mother's unpaid labour and economic and social sacrifices, but that support is also assumed to continue throughout the life course. Therefore, while parental decisions about the distribution of unpaid and paid work within the household are talked about as 'choice' in current family discourse, what we are really talking about is an informal, usually unstated, *private* 'social contract'. For mothers, it is sacrifice now for the sake of the family in return for a promise of reaping the compensation for these sacrifices now and on into the future.

The informal, non-legal status of this contract is highly problematic in the event of marital breakdown. At separation, the contract becomes null and void and the financial risks of marital separation are heavily weighted against the spouse who has been the primary carer. While property settlements and child support obligations assist, the wealth of data on the highly disadvantaged position of many Australian women after divorce, compared to men, indicate that these ameliorations are severely inadequate (see Weston 1993). The economic and social costs paid by mothers for their caring support and, more particularly, the on-going consequences of these, remain largely unrecompensed.

One way of making the costs and risks of parenting more equitable would be to continue sharing family income post separation. Crittendon (2001), addressing the issue from the American context, proposes overhauling the marriage contract to legally designate the income of both parents as family income, both within the marriage *and* post-divorce. This simple measure, she argues, would first institutionalise the sharing and altruism necessary for family life in two-parent families and second, ensure that all family members have a similar standard of living post-separation. While such ongoing family income sharing would certainly spread the risks and costs of divorce, it would also have significant limitations. Most obvious would be the continuation of interfamilial dependence. Not only would the primary carer still be indefinitely dependent, but in many cases such dependence would result in a continuation of marital conflict. Given that it is women, many of whom leave a marriage regardless of the financial costs involved, who seek the majority of divorces, on-going income sharing is not likely to work in mothers' favour overall. As Australian evidence relating to child support shows, for a significant number of parents, the child support collection arrangements can themselves operate as a platform for ongoing conflict and power imbalance, usually to the detriment of the resident parent and children (Walter 2002).

A better option may be for a compensation of the true costs of caring work to be built into family law. Rather than a review of the marriage contract, a formal parenting contract might offer a better solution. Under a parenting contract, which could come into force at the birth of a child, *regardless of the marital status of the parents*, the informal family 'choices' relating to the distribution of unpaid caring work would be formalised. As such, their reciprocal nature would be reinforced. The compensatory rewards for that work would also be detailed. More crucially, such a contract could detail how such 'upfront' sacrifices made by the primary carer as part of this contract would be repaid should the marital/de facto relationship end. How couples choose to compensate the primary carer for his/her financial and labour market sacrifices could still be flexible. Some may choose to allocate a greater proportion of family assets to the primary carer in the event of separation. Others may include options such as the financing of further study to facilitate a return to the labour market once the children reach a certain age, regardless of the status of the marital relationship. Still others may decide to share the caring work and thus share the costs implicit in this role more evenly. Of course, for many families the resources available for compensatory



distribution would be limited. Yet, even here, a parenting contract could ensure that at least some compensation for motherhood sacrifices would be made and, equally, mothers embarking on the primary caring role would be aware of the costs and risks.

For a parenting contract to be a possibility, however, the true costs of caring work need to be both established and publicly recognised. This prospect seems extremely unlikely given the current direction of family policy. Directly reflecting the dominant, private, family discourse, mothers are actively encouraged *out* of the labour market and, more importantly, are deemed to be freely *choosing* the primary caring role based on their true preferences. While many women do indeed wish to give primacy to mothering over market work considerations, the completely voluntary nature of such choices is more questionable. Unless one adopts one's children out, or has the resources to hire full-time nannies and carers, once a woman is a mother it is not practically possible to choose *not* to undertake a significant amount of parenting work. For the vast majority of Australian women, neither of these two options is viable. Mothers' love for their children, ideologies and social norms on the values implicit in motherhood, the lack of social support for caring work, and limited labour market opportunities for those with caring work obligations, actively and constantly, constrain women's preferences and choices.

The lack of political and social acknowledgement of the true costs and risks of the primary caring role means that the very high price that Australian mothers pay when they become a sole mother is also unacknowledged. Paradoxically, however, despite the significant risk faced by all partnered mothers of becoming a sole mother at some point in the life course, to even suggest that sole motherhood is a real possibility is politically and socially taboo. Despite the long-term trend toward increasing numbers of sole mother families across the western world, discussion of the prevalence of sole parenthood, except in pejorative terms, is deemed a threat to the family unit itself. Under the influence of dominant family discourse, sole mother families are still viewed, and politically portrayed, as a deviant family form. It seems economically irrational that the same women who willingly insure the primary earner's life to safeguard their family's material well-being from the possibility of widowhood will not countenance taking any direct measures to ensure the welfare of themselves and their children against the *very much greater likelihood* of familial separation.

## 10.2 The Future of Welfare Reform and the Domain of Sole Motherhood

As in most research, this study has raised as many questions as it has answered. Many of these questions hinge around the likely impact of the welfare reform process on the ability of Australian sole mothers to be both a mother and a worker. How will the social, political, ideological and practical domain of sole motherhood be altered by the on-going reform of the Australian welfare state? In turn, how will welfare reform affect the relationship of sole mothers to the labour market in comparison to married mothers? More critically, how will these changes affect the children and families of sole mother households? For example, while research has been undertaken on patterns of how, why, and when sole mothers exit the welfare system (see Chalmers 1999), and how families readjust after separation and divorce (see Funder et al. 1993), little is known about how sole mothers negotiate their ongoing relationship with the labour market once they leave income support. The work patterns of former welfare recipients, or the long-term financial and welfare outcome of these mothers are areas in which further research is required. Although the impact on sole mother families of revolving between welfare receipt and low income, low security employment has been studied in the United States (see Harris 1996; Harris & Edin 2000; Harris, Guo & Marmèr 2000), little, if any, Australian research has been undertaken in this area, despite the identification of a similar pattern in Australia. Moreover, the on-again, off-again pattern of welfare receipt is also likely to be exacerbated under welfare reform.

Other than those questions raised in this thesis, few questions about the efficacy of labour market activity for sole mother families have been asked in Australia, let alone answered. Rather, as previously discussed, the consistent presumption has been that labour market activity is an unmitigated good for sole mother households, despite the dearth of empirical evidence to back this assumption. The link between sole mother labour market participation rates, levels of household material well-being, welfare regime type, and the state's support for caring work also requires further exploration. In the rush to welfare reform, considerations along these lines appear to have been pushed aside, or, as in the case of childcare, assigned to the market for remediation. How sole mother families are actually managing the

(growing) practical constraints on active parenting and labour market participation is another area that needs on-going attention.

### 10.2.1 Postscript

On 27 March 2003, the Senate passed the *Australians Working Together Bill*. Under this welfare reform legislation, mutual obligation provisions now apply to Australian sole parents – although in a ‘deal’ done with the Democrats, the penalties for the first breach have been somewhat softened. Under this ‘softer’ option, the penalty for missing an interview at Centrelink has been limited to an 18 per cent reduction of income support payment for eight weeks, instead of 26 weeks. Such largesse will not apply to second or third breaches, or to more seriously regarded breaches such as turning down a job or not declaring all earnings (Wroe 2003). Despite the harshness of the breach penalties, at first glance the current mutual obligation requirements of sole parents do not appear too onerous. The 150 hours over six months of participation activity mandated under these new provisions is relatively low, and the assistance attached to the obligations is likely to benefit many sole mothers. Rather, the destructive potential of mutual obligation lies not so much in the provisions themselves, but in their reinforcement of the stereotype of sole mothers as work-shy, welfare dependent, and needing to be compelled to participate in the labour market.

As discussed throughout this thesis, for Australian sole mothers, current welfare reform contains two aligned, but separate, fields of repercussion. First is the actual concrete changes to the position of sole mothers within the Australian welfare state. In line with other Anglo countries, the Australian welfare system now individualises both the causes and remedies for welfare dependency. As such, many sole mothers are now subject to mutual obligation principles and will need to participate in a workforce activity to retain income support entitlement. The second dimension is the changing position of sole mothers in public and political discourse. While Esping-Andersen (1990) argues that in ‘liberal regimes’ such as Australia, concerns of gender matter less than the sanctity of the market, O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) refute this contention, arguing instead that the sanctity of motherhood has, until now, shielded women from the sanctity of the market. For sole mothers, as opposed to partnered mothers, this position is now altering. Sole mothers have lost

the protective umbrella of motherhood and are instead being actively excised from family policy and relegated to a place within welfare reform discourse and policy. This change is exemplified by the McClure Report (RGWR 2000) recommendation for a single income support payment stream. The outcome of this direction is the current proposal to create a single welfare payment for all 'working age' welfare recipients, regardless of their family or parenting situation (Vanstone & Abbott 2002). The rationale for this realignment of sole mothers as just another group of 'working age welfare recipients' is supported by a pejorative comparison of sole mothers with two-parent families. In the *Building a Simpler System to Help Jobless Families and Individuals* consultation paper, released in December 2002, current income support payments for sole mothers are labelled as a discouragement to repartnering or reconciliation and thus 'sending the wrong message' (Vanstone & Abbott 2002, p. 7). While the 'right' message is not articulated in this paper, the logical outcome of this rationale is a reduction in payment amounts to sole mother families to reduce the incentive to become or remain a sole mother.

There is a certain inevitability and predictability about the likely future direction of Australian welfare reform for sole mothers. What will happen if despite on-going welfare reform sole mothers still do not participate in the labour market at sufficiently high rates? The analysis from this study would suggest that, given the increasingly difficult social, political and ideological environment in which sole mothers must negotiate their relationship with the labour market, this is a likely scenario. Are the current mutual obligation provisions likely to be just the thin end of the wedge? As articulated by Evans (1993), when official policy encouragement fails to result in sufficient numbers of sole mothers making the 'right' choice about labour market participation, work requirements are likely to become increasingly stringent and coercive. The mandatory work provisions and lifetime welfare limits contained in the 1996 American welfare reform legislation present a graphic illustration of the end result of such a continuum. For Australian sole mothers the question, therefore, is: where to next in this evolutionary process? For Australian sole mothers, how much welfare reform will be enough?

### 10.3 Concluding Thoughts

The results of this thesis suggest that the current Australian welfare reform response to sole motherhood is misdirected. In this analysis it is the *soleness of parenting* that emerges as the major explanation of differences between the sole and married mothers across each dimension of their relationship to the labour market, rather than differing social or personal characteristics, or attitudes and values towards labour market activity. The current bifurcation in policy direction between sole and married mothers is, therefore, a false dichotomy. Mothers are mothers, whether sole or married, but the domain in which that motherhood is lived and experienced, and in which the relationship with the labour market is negotiated, differs according to partnered status. Thus, the motherhood of sole mothers, as with married mothers, is an essential ingredient in the analysis, prediction or social policy responses relating to levels of labour market activity.

The welfare reform extension of mutual obligation to sole parents, in particular, represents a significant departure from previous policy. Although policy developed from the Social Security Review of the late 1980s contained encouragement for market work, that encouragement is now superseded by sanctions. In effect, the carrot has been replaced with the stick, and the previous welfare state premise which construed sole mothers as full time caregivers and, therefore, unemployable, has eroded completely. Under welfare reform, the emphasis has also shifted from reducing poverty to reducing welfare dependence. These concepts, although often used as if interchangeable, are not the same thing. Underpinning this changing emphasis is a strong moral and ideological dimension. Labour market work is regarded as inherently beneficial in its own right and thus enforcement of work obligations is essential for sole mothers' and society's own good. Hence, the mandatory aspects of welfare reform policy tend to be framed in virtuous terms such as 'helping people to move forward' along a pathway beyond dependency' (Federal Coalition Government 2001, p. 1). Crucially, reducing levels of welfare dependence does not necessarily equate to reducing poverty in sole mother families. Indeed, as shown in this thesis, pushing sole mothers into low wage, low security work may not even result in an overall reduction in income support reliance.

This thesis does not allege that workforce participation is bad for sole mother families. In many cases, the opposite may be true. However, it does regard the continued focus on workforce participation as the major social policy response to the sole parent 'problem' as simplistic. Such policy, and the comparison of married and sole mother labour market participation rates that accompany it, does not reflect the reality of sole mothers' relationship with the labour market as it operates within the domain of sole motherhood. It also fails to recognise that mothers' economic vulnerability generally *precedes* their single mother status. Sole mothers' earning capacity and level of workforce activity are heavily constrained by their past and present obligations to the unpaid work of caring of children. Moreover, sole mothers are neither homogenous in their attitudes to labour market work, nor is sole motherhood a lifetime status. Rather, given the rising number of sole parent families and the direction of this trend, sole motherhood might be more appropriately regarded as an increasingly predictable part of the life course for a significant proportion of Australian mothers. The results of this thesis should give pause to married mothers contemplating devoting themselves to the parenting role via full or partial withdrawal from the labour market premised upon reliance on a husband's financial support. While such private dependency is currently sanctioned and even overtly promoted by family social policy, this encouragement will quickly turn to disapprobation should their relationship break down and their partnered status change.

Demands for greater labour market participation are the practical core of the Australian welfare reform process for sole mothers. Such policy demands, however, remain separated in practical and ideological terms from factors crucial to sole mothers' ability to be both a mother and a worker. The radically restructured nature of the Australian labour market, the changing terrain of family formation, the lack of social support and acknowledgement for caring work, the parenting work required for effective family functioning, and ideologies of good motherhood, all appear unconsidered in the redefinition of sole mothers as just another group of unemployed Australians. While social policy that allows *all* mothers to combine the two roles has been shown to be that most likely to reduce sole mother family poverty and increase market activity in sole mother households, such a policy framework appears highly unlikely in an Australian welfare state that is increasingly dominated by neo-liberalist inspired social and economic policy. Will increasing the obligation for sole

mothers to undertake labour force activity merely replace inadequate monies from income support with inadequate market income? The findings of this thesis should sound a word of caution in the current rush to replace the welfare state with the market economy. For many sole mother households, working their way out of poverty may not be an accessible or realistic option.

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