

“Outside systems control my life”

The experience of single mothers on Welfare to Work



Findings at a glance

Background

The Welfare to Work reforms were introduced in 2006 with the aim of increasing workforce participation and self-reliance among several groups of people on income support payments, including single parents in receipt of Parenting Payment Single. As a form of welfare conditionality – the linking of the right to social security with particular obligations such as job search activities – the policy currently requires single parents to undertake mutual obligation activities once their youngest child turns six. Single parents are moved onto the lower Newstart Allowance when their youngest child turns eight.

Since the majority of single parents are women, this project aimed to investigate whether the policy has achieved its stated objectives of improving workforce participation, self-reliance and financial security for single mothers. Additionally, this research examined the implementation of the policy by illuminating the day-to-day experiences that single mothers have with jobactive providers and Centrelink.

How did we do this research?

In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 single mothers from around Australia who have experience of the Welfare to Work policy.

Key findings

Welfare to Work is not delivering on its aim of increasing participation in employment.

Twenty five of the women interviewed reported that jobactive providers had not assisted them in finding employment; only one participant reported receiving assistance to secure a short-term role.

The Welfare to Work policy was assessed as not helpful, with research participants indicating that jobactive providers were exclusively focused on meeting their contractual obligations to government as opposed to providing them with individual, tailored assistance.

Welfare to Work is not delivering on its aim of supporting self-reliance.

Jobactive providers were unable to link women with employment that matched their experience and skills nor were they able to support long-term career goals and aspirations. Available jobs were limited to the providers' existing contracts, such as those in manufacturing and hospitality.

For the most part, jobactive providers were unable or unwilling to assist with job searches, CV writing, networking or other activities that would build self-sufficiency and improve job prospects.

Two women with a desire to start a business said that jobactive providers did not have the knowledge to assist them, while another participant who had already started her own business was barred from having her work building up a client base considered as an approved activity.

For those women already undertaking some employment, study or entrepreneurial activity, Welfare to Work inhibited their progress due to compliance requirements. Volunteer work was not recognised for one participant, while others had to leave work to attend compulsory meetings.

Welfare to Work is not delivering on its aim of improving financial security and is instead increasing financial insecurity.

Nearly all participants reported having their payments cut due to negligence or poor communication between their jobactive provider and Centrelink or due to inconsistent policy interpretation.

Some women go without eating, while others rely on food banks or family members to meet their essential costs. Only four out of the 26 women interviewed would be able to raise \$2,000 in an emergency by either borrowing from family or selling assets. Women live in fear of the day when their youngest child turns eight and they will be moved onto the lower Newstart payment.

Welfare to Work does not take into account the reality of women's lives, including their caring responsibilities and, for some, post-separation abuse.

Several participants reported that their caring responsibilities were not understood or valued by jobactive providers, particularly in relation to casual and contract work and the difficulty in reconciling these conditions with child care availability. The essential unpaid work of parenting is rendered invisible, while the system is unable to recognise complex individual circumstances.

Face-to-face interactions with jobactive providers were experienced as stressful and undermining of self-worth.

Several participants reported 'microaggressions' from providers and an adherence to negative stereotypes about single mothers. Women reported having been yelled at, and in one case sexually harassed, by jobactive providers. These experiences resulted in women developing anxious behaviours such as hypervigilance.

In spite of negative experiences with Welfare to Work, women displayed persistence and courage in the face of adversity.

The women who participated in this research displayed considerable persistence in response to the challenges they faced. All participants understood the value of their role as mothers even if they felt that jobactive and Centrelink did not. Several women are pursuing long-term goals and aspirations to support themselves and their children in spite of the pressures of financial insecurity and a harsh and inflexible compliance regime.



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