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S10.11.1

Supplementary Submission to the Social Services Committee on the Social Assistance (Future Focus) Bill

“Know me before you judge me”, the advertisement which depicts high profile New Zealanders with mental illness, also adequately equates to the negative stereotyping that women on the domestic purposes benefit in particular, experience on a regular basis.

The media and some Government’s have depicted women, with or without children, living on benefits as being “bludgers who are lazy and steal tax payer money; bludgers making a life-style choice”. These messages have stuck. Some of the public respond to this verbal imagery by demanding tougher regulation and accountability, without any regard or understanding of what the individual circumstances might be that have led to the current predicament.

As early as 1919 NCWNZ formed policy calling for men who abandoned their wives or girlfriends, penniless and with children, to pay towards the upkeep of these families, the Destitute Persons Act. While maintenance is more frequently thought of as child support these days, it was a more modern Government that took the approach of providing Social Assistance for people who were unable to find work, for example during recessionary times, or for people who were incapable of working due to a physical or mental impairment, and for sole-parents raising their children.

To quote commentary which NCWNZ has gathered via the consultation on CEDAW, which relates to the depiction and treatment of women on the benefit: “treating women as bludgers is to ignore the substantial inequalities in this country across class, ethnicity and gender, which means that some people have fewer resources and fewer chances to gather those resources than others”.

So knowing women who are on the benefit, as this delegation from the National Council of Women of New Zealand does, we can say:

- There is an “unknown quantity” of domestic violence sufferers whose first port of call for financial assistance following their release from their former, hostile partner, or a sheltering refuge is to go on to the DPB or unemployment, sickness benefit.
- Some women on the DPB fell pregnant by mistake and they did originally have career plans that raising children has temporarily led to the need for reprioritising their lives

- Some women are trying to make a second relationship work. In the first relationship the father did not want children and abandoned mother and baby before birth. In the second relationship, the man does not want to financially support his new partner and insists that she draws the DPB to meet her own financial need and that of her daughter. Their new baby together, he will contribute towards her.
- One woman, in her late 30's when she fell pregnant – she had a high paying job and returned to work within 4 months of the baby being born, and when everything seemed fine and manageable, her child was off to school, she was made redundant due to the recession. She has been hunting for work in her field of expertise for over a year, no joy thus far.
- Other women have been victims of sexual abuse, violence in the home, neglect and abandonment when they were children. They haven't as yet sought counselling as they aren't ready to fully disclose. They have a low level of self-esteem; keep making bad choices in the selection of their partners, aren't able to settle on a potential career path because they don't see themselves as being worth anything in any case.
- Other women have drinking or drug problems, just trying to wipe away their disappointment with life and the lot they feel they were dealt.
- Some women are really planning for the future; they are studying courses as they will be able to work very soon with the kids heading off to school. They left their relationship because the partner was emotionally abusive and they had just had enough and were grateful that their family was to hand to help them.
- And others are having problems; they are the third generation DPB mother. Got some anger issues and drink a bit much. They find it tough raising a son and are worried that if they aren't strict with him he will turn into a tear-away.
- Some women have been married for a long time and then their relationship ends. Their husband abandons the family with a view to starting a new family. The woman opts to stay at home for a while to stabilise her family – the career comes second.
- Some women have husbands in jail and are left with no income and are then forced on to the DPB. In some cases they have traumatised children. In a lot of cases the crime committed by the father is reflected on the children both in terms of interactions with their peers and in their own behaviour. Mothers need to be at home in these cases.
- Some women have their elderly parent(s) move in with them and such women become the primary caregiver to both their elderly parent (s) and children.
- Disabled children have greater needs and at times more resource demands, again being forced to take up work to supplement the DPB is not viable or manageable.

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services *Facts about Poverty*, August 2009¹ says:

Benefits are not enough to live on with dignity – this is the real issue

- The benefit system is complex and people are often not made aware of their entitlements

¹ <http://www.nzccss.org.nz/uploads/publications/Facts%20about%20Poverty%20Update%202009%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

- Housing assistance is inadequate
- Contrary to the popular myth, people in poverty don't spend all their money on alcohol, smokes and gambling
- Inadequate income is the real issue affecting the ability of people in poverty to manage their Finances
- Living on a benefit is not a good 'lifestyle'
- Few women on the DPB are unmarried teenage mums
- Most sole parents stay on benefits for a short period, and usually only while their child is young
- There is some benefit fraud, but most debt to Work and Income is the result of negotiated 'recoverable assistance' loans or 'Innocent Overpayment Debt'
- Most beneficiaries want to work. International research does not support the assumption that beneficiaries lack a work ethic and are content with the beneficiary 'life-style'
- There are good reasons why not all beneficiaries should get a job right now: health problems, disabilities and childcare responsibilities all present major barriers to work

The majority of people living on benefits are not children who need to be chastised via some punitive legal mechanisms – they are people who are struggling to have the same share of the resources and the same share of the opportunities as the rest of us. An ounce of respect in their direction, an ounce of support and real interest in what it is that is holding them back will have far greater impact in saving “hardworking tax-payer money”. And since when was trying to raise children off the sniff of an oily rag, to create good community-spirited citizens, not hard work!

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