

Talk > Think

How Life As A Single Mum Has Changed Since 1980

Three generations of Australian single mothers discuss the struggles and stigma of parenting alone.

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Three generations of Australian single mothers discuss the struggles and stigma of parenting alone.

When Suzie Andrews*, a single mother of four, found the perfect rental property, the

estate agent was more than happy for her to sign on the dotted line - after all, she had the deposit and a great job with a secure income. They just had one condition: that a man stand guarantor.

Happily, Andrews had a close male friend who agreed to do that. A man on a fraction of her salary and with existing financial commitments.

Welcome to single parenting Australia-style in the 1980s, where you didn't just need a good income to secure a rental - you needed a penis.

The system is not on our side

As a single mum in the 1980s, Andrews says the system was not on her side.

“My husband dragged out property and custody negotiations and for two years he didn't pay any child support. And because I was technically still married, there was no government support.

“My husband wanted to punish me but there was no thought for what that would do to the children. These days the government can garnish the wages of 'dead beat dads' but there was little support in the 1980s.

“At the time I left my husband, I didn't know any other single mothers; I only had one or two friends who worked. The concept of the working mother was still pretty controversial.”



It's never been easy to go it alone. Photo: iStock

Fast-forward 30 years and things are a bit different

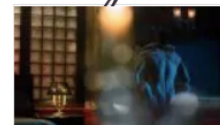
My own experience as a single mother in the 2010s is vastly different. My bank doesn't care that I haven't got a husband and any institution that dares demand a man's OK before offering me goods or services risks being hit with legal action faster than you can say #ThatsMySolicitorOnTheOtherLine.

These days marriage breakdown is hardly out of the ordinary, and gone are the days when women going it alone were pitied or viewed as failures.

I became a mum to my two daughters Greta and Rori thanks to IVF and the generosity of an anonymous sperm donor. There are two other women in my immediate circle of friends who have done the same, and there are countless support groups, online and in person, offered by the government and NGOs.

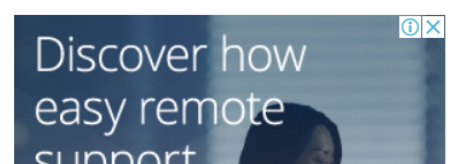
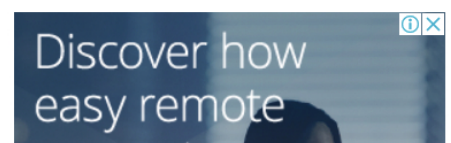
“There's been a lot of changes to tangible legal discrimination,” agrees Jenny Davidson,

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CEO of the Council of Single Mothers and Their Children. “It’s the intangible discrimination that is still a problem.

“Today the majority of care still falls to the mothers, which leaves mothers financially worse off than fathers. Mothers don’t have the same employment opportunities as fathers because they need to fit work around their parenting obligations. Many more men are able to get back into the housing market after dividing the assets.”

The problem with intangible discrimination

Alice Benson* found the sole responsibility and obligation to be a defining element of her experiences of being a single parent in the 1990s. A small business owner, when Benson found herself unexpectedly pregnant as a result of a brief relationship she decided to have the baby and become a single mum.

“I was confident I could do it alone,” she remembers. “But it all quickly fell apart. There was an issue with the manager I had left in charge of the business, and I was having trouble coping, so I eventually closed the business down.

“Being a single mum is extremely challenging. It’s exhausting and sometimes you just cry and cry because it’s all too much.”



Discrimination might be less obvious, but it's still there. Photo: iStock

Benson says that although she never experienced discrimination, the stigma of single motherhood was still thick in the air as the year 2000 approached.

“I wasn’t coping but I felt too ashamed to say anything to friends. I felt like people would say ‘Well you chose to have a baby.’”

There is one way, she says, it was actually easier. “Things were always tough financially, but back then you could live on the pension if you needed to,” says Benson. “But these days I don’t think it’s possible.”

Living in poverty

She’s right. Currently, the most a single mother will receive on Parenting Payment Single is \$762.40 per fortnight. With the median rental price in Sydney sitting at \$960 per fortnight, and Melbourne not far behind, it’s not unusual for house costs to take the majority of the payment.

“Currently one in three single parent families are living in poverty,” says Jenny Davidson. “Poverty is actually getting worse for single mothers.”

“You can track if from the Gillard Government’s decision in 2012 to move single parents whose youngest child was eight or older onto Newstart”



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whose youngest child was eight or older onto Newstart.

“It represents a drop in income of \$172 per fortnight, which is significant for households with barely enough money to make ends meet,” says Davidson.



How are we expected to make ends meet? Image: iStock.

An advertisement for Rescue by MetLife. The background is dark blue. At the top left is the Rescue by MetLife logo. The main text reads "Your Customers Have High Expectations." followed by "See why support should go above and beyond." At the bottom is a green button with the text "REQUEST DEMO" and a right-pointing arrow. There are small icons in the top right corner of the ad.

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Moving single mothers to Newstart continues to make it near impossible for single mothers to get back on their feet.

“When you are on Parenting Payment Single you can earn a certain amount of money before the pension starts reducing and then it’s at a rate of 40c in the dollar. On Newstart, it starts decreasing pretty much as soon as you start earning. It makes it impossible to work your way out of poverty.”

Regardless of the dire consequences, slashing payment to single mothers is still as popular amongst some groups today as it was in 2012.

“You get all this discussion in the media about single mothers and how bad it is that they are relying on the government for support,” says Davidson. “But what about the fathers who are defaulting on child support payments and making the government pay the cost of raising their children?”

“Australia has an unpaid child support debt of \$1.53 billion. And that figure is not comprehensive because that’s only debt through the Child Support Agency, not private agreements.”

Davidson says the number of single mothers raising children in poverty is a national disgrace. “Single mothers are the true unsung heroes of our community. They are doing a fantastic job of raising children despite huge challenges. We should be doing more to honour them.”

* Names have been changed.



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