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BRIDES OF THE STATE? CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN INCOME SUPPORT POLICY FOR SOLO MOTHERS IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Policy at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

In 1997 the domestic purposes benefit (DPB), formerly a caregivers benefit, became a work-tested benefit. Through the extension of the work-test policy makers claim to be promoting solo mother's economic independence from the state via paid work. However, it is my thesis that income support policy in New Zealand, as with other English speaking countries, has never promoted solo mother's economic independence¹ and that it continues to encourage their dependency on men.

For instance, although some groups of solo mothers had to seek paid work prior to the introduction of the DPB, this was more as a form of punishment for bearing children outside marriage than a measure to foster their economic independence. While the DPB did provide women with the means of becoming economically independent of men and marriage, it replicated family relationships and trapped many women in poverty. Similarly, although the Government expects solo mothers in the late 1990s to become self-reliant through paid work, it has not removed the barriers in the labour market that prevent many women from earning a 'living wage' and fails to provide adequate supports for working mothers such as affordable childcare. As a result, many solo mothers may be forced into low paid work and/or economic dependency on men in relationships.

This research has taken a desk-based², policy oriented approach to explore the income support system's treatment of solo mothers and the impact of income support policies on their ability to raise their children independent of men. Both past and present income support policy is examined and compared within a wider policy context that looks at the economic and social position of women in society. Comparisons are made between past and present income support policy so that an assessment can be made as to whether the extension of the work-test to solo mothers will enable them to become economically independent, or whether it signals a return to the 'pre-DPB' days and greater pressure for solo mothers to remain in relationships with male wage-earners.

¹In social policy, the term 'dependence' is narrowly used to refer to those people who rely on the state for an income. Thus, the term 'independence' is used to refer to those people who do not have to rely on the state for support. In this thesis, however, economic 'independence' refers to the situation of having sufficient resources to raise one's children and participate in society as full citizens with out having to rely on other adults for support.

²In contrast to fieldwork, desk-based research does not necessitate going out into the field to collect data. Instead, desk-based research may involve analysing data and literature that has already been collected. As Baxter, Hughes and Tight (1996:62) stated, "[desk-based research] consists, literally, of those things which can be one while sitting at a desk".
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