

## Opinion 3

# Donna Bennett

## Chief Executive Officer, Hope Street Youth and Family Services



My first job as a new graduate was a Youth Housing Support Worker for young people with dependents in Broadmeadows. As a social work student I had worked in two other positions in the sector one of which was for a young women's refuge in regional Victoria. Working in the young women's refuge was compatible with my feminist and social justice principles. My new position was therefore a natural flow on from my previous work and I was very enthusiastic about working primarily with young women and their children.

I was young myself (21 years) and grew up in regional Victoria where it was not uncommon for young women to have their first baby at 19 or 20 or 21 years. It was however unusual for young women (without children) to continue with their education and relocate to Melbourne to study at a tertiary level as I did. Instead, the pathway for many young women was to leave school, get a job (supermarkets or the textile industry were key employers) and within a few years get married (or not) and start a family. This was the

start of adult life for one of my closet school friends who had her first baby at 20 years old.

My experience therefore wasn't unusual for young women to have babies and that young women were loving mothers who adored their babies and wanted to do everything they possibly could to care, protect and create a home for their baby. In consultation with some of the young women in Hope Street's transitional and crisis accommodation, for the purpose of this article, young women commented on feeling excited, happy and fearful about the change ahead when they knew they were pregnant however were looking forward to being a mum and creating their own family. The same feelings I had when I had my first baby at 30 and feelings that all mums share regardless of age.

What I saw and understood from my friends and life in regional Victoria did not prepare me however for the level of disadvantage, discrimination, negative judgements, poverty and isolation I soon learned about in my new role as a social worker. The most confusing aspect for me was that much of the above was caused by social, political and financial/economic structures within society that purposely disadvantaged young women with children. For example, the *single mothers pension* was (still is) a minimal income below the poverty line; lack of affordable childcare; barriers to accessing affordable training opportunities and the paid workforce. I soon learnt that not only were these negative judgements because they were young women it was also because they were single ... not married/de facto to someone who would financially provide for them (...a man). Keeping people poor by providing low levels

of social income was to me an example of our social and financial policy makers penalising women for having children without live in fathers. Low income was a major factor leading to homelessness due to the low housing affordability and demand for public housing that outstripped supply.

Unfortunately this 1950's patriarchal and institutional attitude seemed to be reinforced via groups, individuals and families within the community. Unfortunately in a number of cases, this attitude by the young women's own families resulted in stigma and social isolation which often impacted on young women's self confidence and lack of confidence that community and government services would not judge or treat their child/ren differently because their mum was young and not married. In fact this was such an issue, that a local service developed a video called *So Young* which was a composition of young mums sharing their experiences to educate and raise awareness in the local community.

The young mums who did feel confident and seemed to have some resilience toward social attitudes were those who had support from their family in-particular their mum. Young women would tell me how important it was for them having the support of their parent/s. Grandparents (of the children) taking mum and child to do the grocery shopping or to appointments; providing short periods of child care; someone to talk to about their baby's milestones, changes, routines, behaviours etc was very much valued by young women. This was reiterated recently by some of the young women with children in the Hope Street programs commenting on the value of support from family and friends — 'I needed

the support of my family and friends and the maternal health nurse was also a great help...'

While I saw the poverty, discrimination and negative judgements made against young single mums and their children I also saw much resilience and many strengths. Like my school friend I witnessed the love, devotion and care women gave to their children; the incredible resourcefulness of making a dollar stretch ensuring their child is fed and has somewhere to live; pride and joy experienced with each new developmental milestone shown by their child; the intelligence and capability of the young women to understand, consider and make decisions as a part of providing for their child/ren showing a level of maturity beyond their years. 'You have to grow up very quickly when you have a child because your child's life depends on you...' was a comment by a young mum from a Hope Street program.

Twenty six years on, I'm astonished (not surprised) that our social and financial policy makers continue to purposely disadvantage single women with children perpetuating entrenched poverty. I see this with the young women with children who enter our programs at Hope Street

Youth and Family Services. It is also a social situation that is visible to others. Scanning the *Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2013–2014 Annual Report*, the Executive Officer Tenar Dwyer, points out that the 2014 Federal Budget in May 'appears to be a deliberate attack on women and children.'<sup>1</sup> Dwyer continues by noting that 'despite Australia having some of the lowest rates of welfare spending in the OECD and surviving the global financial crisis virtually unscathed ... the government has aggressively campaigned to paint single mothers, young people and other vulnerable Australians as leaners who are a drain on the public purse.'<sup>2</sup>

The Centrelink income of single parent households is lower than the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research poverty lines.<sup>3</sup> The impact of poverty is homelessness as well as other individual, social and economic consequences. Dwyer reports that 'CSMC has seen a marked increase in Victorian single mother families identifying as homeless since the changes to income support were extended in 2012 and single mother families are among the fastest growing group experiencing homelessness.'<sup>4</sup>

Key pathways out of poverty and homelessness are education and employment. Investing in affordable housing, access to education, liveable incomes, health care, affordable and accessible childcare, meaningful employment and training opportunities is do-able in our first world nation and does make a meaningful difference to the lives of women and their children with many flow on benefits to the rest of society and the economy.

I congratulate young women who are mums for their drive and achievements. My friend's journey as a young mum included hardship and poverty. However, with stable housing (public housing) she went back to school in her late 30s completed her Victorian Certificate of Education and went on to complete a university course and is now working full time in the health sector. As one of the Hope Street young women stated: 'Not all teenage mothers are going to end up doing nothing with their lives there are so many amazing things we can do...'

#### Endnotes

1. *Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Annual Report 2013–2014*, p. 4.
2. *ibid*
3. *Poverty Lines: Australia*, March Quarter, 2015, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.
4. *ibid*

# Subscription/Order Form

Parity costs \$100 for a 12 month ten edition subscription.

I wish to subscribe to Parity

Name .....

Address .....

Organisation (if applicable) .....

Telephone ..... Fax .....

Email .....

Organisations, institutions, employed: \$100 for 12 months

Students, unemployed, pensioners: \$50 for 12 months

Multiple copies of parity can be provided for an additional \$35 per copy if they are to be delivered to the same address. (for example, two copies for 12 months: \$135, three copies for 12 months: \$170 etc).

I would like ..... additional copies to be sent \$ .....

#### PAYMENT OPTIONS

Enclosed is a cheque/money order

Please charge my credit card (PLEASE PRINT):

Visa  Mastercard  Bankcard

Name on card .....

Expiry .....

Signature .....

Please invoice me

Send completed form and payment to: Council to Homeless Persons  
2 Stanley Street Collingwood Victoria 3066 T (03) 8415 6200 F (03) 9416 0200  
Email: [parity@chp.org.au](mailto:parity@chp.org.au) [www.chp.org.au/services/parity-magazine](http://www.chp.org.au/services/parity-magazine)

Cost of subscription: \$ .....

Additional copies: \$ .....

TOTAL: \$ .....