

Single mothers — society's new heroines

The summer break was over and the two million regular viewers of the Seven Network's Home and Away were discovering the fate of one of the series' most popular characters. Chloe was a smart, studious girl who had just tackled her final school exams. But she was pregnant and her determination to keep the baby, with or without the support of her doctor boyfriend, had been the subject of much heady drama.

Her decision met with general approval from the close-knit coastal community in which she lived. The boyfriend was still on the scene and the couple seemed set on staying together. But single motherhood was always on the cards. In the world of the soaps, solo child-rearing had become all the rage.

"Single motherhood is now totally acceptable," said Susan Bower, who has spent the previous nine years working as a writer and story editor for local television dramas. "Particularly with the older women in their 20s, you may choose to have a character become a single mother because then she'll be seen as a strong role model. She's not a victim; she's taking charge of her life."

Bower explained that since the early 1980s single motherhood had emerged as an increasingly popular solution to unwanted pregnancy in local television dramas, a decision she saw as reflecting the prevailing belief in women's right to make choices about their lives.

The early evening time slot and young audience for many of these family dramas invited extra caution and also placed restrictions on discussions of contraception. The result was a real distortion of presentation of the choices available to single pregnant women, with solo parenting increasingly promoted as the most acceptable option. "There is also an extraordinary number of miscarriages," said Carol Long, another editor with long experience in local drama. "Women picking up heavy suitcases or falling down stairs. That's the easiest road we go down because that way the character comes out looking rosy because she hasn't had to make a decision."

Many writers mention the single mother scenario as having particular dramatic appeal, adding many possible twists and turns to the plot.

So here we have these enormously popular television dramas not only reflecting growing community acceptance of childrearing by unmarried mothers but perhaps adding momentum to the trend. The possibility left Bower and some colleagues feeling distinctly uneasy. "What we present is so unrealistic," she said. "Writers often get unbelievably frustrated because abortion would often be the best solution for these young women. It worries me that single motherhood is so often promoted as the right way to go."

There are good reasons to be concerned. At the time I wrote this, 27 per cent of all Australian children were being born out of wedlock. The ex-nuptial birth rate had increased by a staggering 70 per cent in the previous 10 year⁶⁴.

These figures were often dismissed as simply reflecting a shift towards non-marital child-rearing. Talking to experts around the country, I was constantly assured that these large numbers of ex-nuptial children were, in fact, being raised by parents in de facto relationships, rather than lone mothers. In the past, the only real data bearing on the true circumstances of these children came from a 1984 Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) maternity leave study, which found that less

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than half of the women having ex-nuptial births were in de facto relationships at the time of the birth⁶⁶.

Many of these unions were found to be extremely unstable — within 18 months of the birth of the child, 19 per cent of the de facto relationships had broken up. Other research from the Institute has shown de facto partnerships are 10 times more likely to break up than a marriage⁶⁷.

But more recent evidence of the true state of affairs came from research produced for this article by Peter McDonald, then a demography professor at the Australian National University. McDonald was analysing data for a Research School of Social Sciences project, “Negotiating the Life Course”, which included information about the relationship histories of women having ex-nuptial births.

The emerging picture was bleak. Yes, it was true that increasing numbers of ex-nuptial births were to couples in de facto relationships. Sixty-five per cent of the ex-nuptial births in the ANU survey were to never-married women in de facto relationships, 18 per cent to never-married solo women, 8.5 per cent to divorced but solo women, and 8.5 per cent to women divorced but in a de facto relationship.

But patterns following the birth revealed many of these de facto relationships to be quite transitory. McDonald says: “About half of the ex-nuptial births are to women who are in and out of relationships, women with complex relationship histories. Even if the child is born in a de facto relationship, that often breaks down.”

And the result is that most of these children do end up being raised by a lone mother, at least until she finds another partner. And we are often not talking just about one ex-nuptial child — almost half of the women McDonald surveyed had more than one such child, children who often accompanied their mother through any number of complex and unstable family situations. The ANU research showed a third of the de facto parents married after the birth of their child but 15 per cent of these marriages ended within a few years. Where the child’s parents didn’t marry, 38 per cent of the relationships broke up in less than five years.

Despite the prominence given in the media to educated, more affluent women who decide to bear children on their own, the ANU research showed that this is a tiny proportion of the swelling numbers of never-married lone mothers — 51 per cent of the women having ex-nuptial children didn’t finish secondary school and 70 per cent had no post-school qualifications. AIFS research has found that couples bearing children in de facto relationships were usually from low socioeconomic backgrounds. And most were young. More than half of all ex-nuptial children are born to women under 25. Even more striking is that most children of women in this age group are born outside marriage.

Most such women are incapable of supporting their children on their own and even though many do receive child support from fathers, most end up joining the ranks supported by our escalating welfare bill. More than 75 per cent of never-married lone mothers were then on the sole parent pension (Australian Bureau of Statistics Family Survey, 1992)⁶⁸, representing more than a quarter of

⁶⁶ Between 1996 and 2011, single-mother families increased from three per cent to four per cent while single father families remained static at one per cent. During that period, 75 per cent of Australian children who had a natural parent living elsewhere were living in one-parent homes. The vast majority (79 per cent) of these children were living with their mother. <https://mentoo.com.au/families-in-australia>

⁶⁷ More recently, in 2014, the ABC ran a fact check on the then Social Services Minister Kevin Andrews’ claim that de facto relationships had a higher incidence of break up than marriages. The verdict was that couples who never married were six times more likely to break up than couples who married <https://mentoo.com.au/defacto-fact-check>. It is very difficult to get updated data specifically on de facto couples with children.

⁶⁸ More recent statistics show that in 2011 only 57 per cent of single mothers were in paid employment, however that is still an increase of 13 percentage points since 1991 <https://mentoo.com.au/parents-working-out-work>. Today, even a single parent who is employed can

the lone-parent population, which receives an annual \$3 billion in welfare payments. Since sole parents in de facto relationships are not eligible for lone parent benefits, the substantial number of never-married lone mothers receiving pensions is proof that either most of these de facto couples are unable to sustain lasting relationships or else they are defrauding the system.

There were then two times more lone parents with dependent children than there were 20 years before. In 1975 about nine per cent of families with dependent children were lone-parent families, compared with about 19 per cent in 1996. Never-married women were emerging as an increasing proportion of the lone-parent population — in 1993, 27 per cent of female sole parent pensioners had never married, compared with 19 per cent in 1974.

In 1972 an intriguing discussion between Germaine Greer and Margaret Whitlam was published in *The National Times*. Whitlam, whose husband had just become prime minister, was outspoken in her criticism of ex-nuptial births, declaring it was irresponsible to produce children outside a family situation. When Greer confessed she was considering having a child on her own, Whitlam was forthright: “Well, I think that’s just a selfish thought.”

Later in the interview, she relented a little: “It may be all right for people who are well known and who have position and who can organise themselves ... but it’s not OK for everybody.”

But it wasn’t long before it was ok for everyone. The early ’70s were a turning point. Up to this time single mothers and their children were stigmatised; the children were legally labelled “illegitimate” and suffered penalties concerning inheritance. There was very little welfare support — most single pregnant women were persuaded to relinquish their children. Large numbers of women entered shotgun marriages — in 1971 more than 40 per cent of births to women under 20 took place in the first eight months of the marriage.

Within months of Margaret Whitlam’s confrontation with Germaine Greer, the Whitlam Government granted single mothers the same welfare payments as widows. This was the official signal that the ground was shifting; the rapid changes taking place in social and sexual attitudes were slowly reducing the shame associated with illegitimacy.

Soon Australian celebrities were proudly showing off exnuptial children in the women’s magazines and promoting the joys of non-marital child-rearing. By January 1977, Kasey Findlay, the blonde baby daughter of a 24-year-old single primary school teacher, was crowned “Baby Australia”.

“It’s the year of the unmarried mother,” announced the newspaper headline describing the occasion. “To the great majority of people in 1977 the unmarried mother is no longer a source of shock or shame but someone who is admired for the sacrifice she is prepared to make and the courage she often shows in a demanding role,” pronounced the editorial in Sydney’s *The Daily Telegraph*.

With the Family Law Act in 1975, huge numbers of divorced and separated women began to swell the ranks of lone parents — by 1986 there were three times as many lone mothers through divorce than never-married sole mothers, and large numbers of babies born to couples in de facto relationships were adding to the never-married group.

still qualify for the parenting payment so long as their income is sufficiently small. (To receive full payment, a mother of two needs to earn less than \$213.20 per fortnight, but partial payment is possible if she earns more than that.) <https://mentoo.com.au/parenting-payment>

Joy Goodsell, convener of the Sole Parent Union, was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1991 as saying: "People having children without being married has just become part of society. I think that we have become more mature in our morality."

The most startling evidence of the dramatic shift that occurred in social attitudes came from an AIFS study on family values released in 1997. The study, conducted by David de Vaus, included a number of questions on attitudes to single motherhood and ex-nuptial children. De Vaus found most people then believed that you need two parents to bring up a child (68 per cent of males and 58 per cent of females). But when women in their 20s — the group most likely to become unmarried mothers — were asked the same question, only 39 per cent felt that two parents were important.

So a majority of young women then felt fathers were incidental to the task of raising children — just as many men were expressing a desire for more involved, hands-on fatherhood.

These trends raise interesting questions about attitudes in future generations — particularly the many young boys being brought up by the new generations of single mothers. One wonders if a boy raised in such circumstances can grow to understand and aspire to the role of family man, valued for his contribution to his children. Are we destined to mimic the tragedy of the young black American males raised by successive generations of single mothers — young men who so often grow up alienated from family life? The adverse economic and social consequences of this trend are easily documented. Single parents are the fastest-growing demographic group in the country and among the most disadvantaged. Sole mothers are more likely to live in poverty, far less likely to be in the fulltime workforce than other women.

In recent years there has been increasing evidence of the disadvantage suffered by children being raised in sole-parent families, with children in these families experiencing more mental and physical health problems and having poorer educational outcomes than children in two-parent families. Adolescent children in such families are more at risk of delinquency, early sexual activity and substance abuse.

The escalating cost to the community of the problems faced by such children are all too apparent — in our schools, in juvenile crime statistics, in over-burdened social welfare services and community welfare organisations and in increasing social welfare payments.

But equally important is the effect on the women making the decision to bear a child on their own or in unstable de facto relationships. Of course, not all women have a choice — for religious or cultural reasons, abortion or contraception may not be an option. And it is certainly true that some women have babies in what they believe are lasting relationships, only to be abandoned by their partners.

But whether or not the decision is deliberate, the results are the same. Most women who end up taking this path are already disadvantaged. By taking on the burden of raising a child or children on their own, they dramatically reduce their opportunities for further education or for achieving stable employment. Research on sole mothers by the AIFS has documented their vulnerability to poverty, their dependence on social security and the difficulties they face in working their way out of their deprived circumstances.

There is also good reason to believe these women are reducing their chances of ever achieving a stable relationship or secure marriage. All subsequent relationships are burdened by the difficulties faced by a new partner in dealing with the woman's children — a proven liability for successful re-partnering.

It all adds up to increasing numbers of Australian women embarking on a mighty risky path — risky to themselves and their children. And they are doing so in the absence of any substantial public debate about the consequences. That's what's surprising about the Australian situation — in contrast to other countries such as the United States and Britain.

Public discussion of the issue erupted in the US during the 1992 presidential election campaign when the Vice-President, Dan Quayle, criticised a TV sitcom character, Murphy Brown, for having a child outside marriage. Although Quayle's comments incited an initially hostile media reaction, within a year an influential article by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in *Atlantic Monthly*, "Dan Quayle was right", led to widespread discussion on the damaging consequences of the trend towards lone parenthood. In 1997 Bill Clinton referred to the trend as "the single biggest social problem in our society".

Similarly, in Britain there was considerable debate over these issues, culminating in a controversy when the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, suffered a serious party rebellion over plans to reduce benefits for single parents. Blair prevailed, but politically the move proved costly, with the resignation of one minister and a big revolt on the Labour back benches. Nevertheless, in the 1990s concern about the growing numbers of sole parents remained very much on the government's agenda.

Certainly, the trend towards sole parenting was more extreme at that time in Britain and the US, with far more adverse consequences. But comment on Australia's dramatic shift in this direction during this time was largely left to a few conservative commentators and radio announcers and the tabloid press. In 1997 figures on ex-nuptial births were greeted by *The Daily Telegraph* with a thundering full-page story headlined "A nation of bastards".

Strangely silent were the many social commentators and policy analysts usually so keen to decry social trends detrimental to women's welfare. The Women's Movement had long preached to women, particularly in developing countries, the importance of controlling fertility and delaying childbearing until they are adequately educated or have acquired work skills. Why the unwillingness to speak out when so many young Australian women were choosing to derail their prospects by having babies on their own or in unstable de facto relationships?

Anne Callanan was then a policy worker for the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, a vigorous lobby group. Callanan agreed with me that there was a reluctance to face the issue. "I think we should be talking about it but I feel so nervous about what would happen in a public debate," she says. "Our concern is that the issue tends to get hijacked by people with a particular agenda. I don't know if I'd want to open that can of worms."

Yet Callanan's extensive personal experience with the struggles faced by single mothers had convinced her that society should be discouraging women from taking on such a burden. "It isn't something we want to encourage, because when you live it on a day-to-day basis, it's so bloody difficult." Having worked to try to reduce the prejudice faced by single mothers, Callanan was forthright about the dilemma she faced: "I'm not sure how you provide proper support to those who are already single mothers and still try to give the message to people who haven't yet done it that it isn't such a good idea."

Despite all the evidence, not everyone is willing to acknowledge it isn't a good idea. I spoke to numerous social policy analysts and spokespeople on women's issues who were loath to acknowledge any detriment to women in this trend. They spoke only of the need to decrease the stigma still attached to lone parenting and increase support to reduce the financial consequences for women of making this choice. Many were angry that women are invariably the ones left to face the consequences of unplanned pregnancy.

Yet of all women's choices, it is unfair to suggest single motherhood lets men off the hook. Single motherhood keeps men liable — at minimum through the payment of child support — but often facing only slender opportunities for a real paternal relationship. Kathleen Swinbourne was then a single mother and the Women's Electoral Lobby spokeswoman on family issues. She felt that if society is concerned about single mothers living in poverty and being undereducated, we should be providing them with more welfare support.

Questioned about the rising costs inherent in this support, Swinbourne argued that the two-parent family also comes at a price to the community. "There's all the costs of domestic violence. That's a very high cost." Swinbourne's view was that we have so many single-parent families because the nuclear family no longer works. "Younger women have been brought up to know they don't need to be treated like second-class citizens. They can do anything they want to do and they aren't willing to accept a relationship that says they can't."

While most women would like to have children within a good relationship, Swinbourne felt that they were no longer willing to compromise about that relationship. "Many's the time I've come across women talking about their husbands or their ex-husbands and making the comment, 'It's like having another child around'. They don't want that sort of relationship." Swinbourne was totally opposed to any attempt to discourage women from becoming single mothers. She believes motherhood is the problem when it comes to limiting women's lives, not just single motherhood. "I wouldn't make a moral judgment on the way anyone makes these decisions. I would never tell them it's not what they should do."

Yet the Women's Electoral Lobby is clearly prescriptive about other aspects of women's lives. Swinbourne explained that "WEL is in favour of getting women into the workforce, getting them financially independent and getting them in charge of their own lives." And even if the decision to bear a child as a single woman places limits on such achievements, Swinbourne believed WEL should still promote women's right to make such a choice. "If that is the choice a woman wants to make, that is a choice that should be supported. I wouldn't push two-parent families at the expense of women living fulfilled lives."

It is sadly true that many adults are failing to find fulfilment in the two-parent family. But having spent five years as a single mother, I balk at the notion that single motherhood should be promoted as a more rewarding option. My own circumstances were immensely privileged. As a widow I had financial security, a well-paid job and wonderful support, but it was still tough going.

And that is why I shudder when, at the time I wrote this article my nine-year-old daughter beamed at the news that one of her favourite television characters was becoming a single mother. It was frightening to see her celebrating such a risky start to adult life. When I asked her whether anyone on the show had suggested the character have an abortion, she was horrified to discover I was talking about killing an unborn baby. This led to a very difficult conversation about why anyone would want to do such a thing and how Chloe was silly enough to get pregnant in the first place — a conversation I can understand many parents wishing to avoid.

But I wonder whether we have gone too far in avoiding difficult conversations about good and bad choices in dealing with unplanned pregnancy, let alone how to avoid it. In recent years we have allowed conservative politicians and lobby groups to limit many of these options — by restricting funding for sex education and family planning services and by limiting discussion of abortion, which remains one means of ensuring fewer Australian children are born into poverty and disadvantage.

Perhaps it's time we started talking long and hard about the risks of having children in de facto relationships, since such partnerships so often lack the commitment that renders marriages a more secure context for raising families. In the absence of this much-needed debate and public education about the real facts of life, child-bearing outside marriage has gained dangerous appeal. We reap the consequences.

Footnotes

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