

# CHILDREN, WOMEN AND MEN

ANN CURTHOYS

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES are at stake when people ask questions about childcare and the role of parents. Should men and women have different responsibilities? Should governments involve themselves in the lives and support of individual households—and if so, how? How far should private enterprise be made to provide for the young? A society in which all childcare is done by women, in private homes, dependent on husband's wages, will be different from one in which childcare is shared between men and women or is undertaken communally or is performed for wages like any other work. Australian policies and practices have long been an amalgam of approaches, and since 1939 there have been continuities and changes which we shall explore in this chapter.

In Australia, as elsewhere, the respective rights and duties of men and women were unsettled by World War II. Women in wartime did jobs traditionally done by men. When men returned from the armed services, should the women now make way for them? In this country the overwhelming opinion was that they should: the rights of the returned men came first; women's assignment to their jobs had been an emergency measure. Voices were heard arguing otherwise. 'Must women return to the kitchen?' asked Clarice McNamara in *Labor Digest*. Margaret Harland's book *Women's place in society* (1947) demanded equal employment opportunities and equal pay for women. The author was once a teacher, during the war a member of the Army Education Service, and now a housewife. Her book was an eloquent appeal against letting women's care of young children become a source of social isolation and a reason for discrimination in the workplace later in their lives. Such voices were few, and even they did not question the arrangement, almost universal in postwar Australia, by which motherhood meant withdrawal from the workforce and full-time childcare at home. Harland and others did insist, though, that the full-time mother deserved social recognition, financial support and publicly provided services to help her bring up the children. The idea that married women should not aspire to paid work was argued by opinion-makers from women's magazines to trade unions. Only young single women, it was said, should

work: most jobs were men's, and if women took them on there would be an oversupply of labour and wages would fall.

When the new feminist critique of the conventional family, with father as breadwinner and mother as full-time houseworker and childcarer, was taken up in Australia from the late 1960s, women's isolation and boredom attracted much attention. The problem of 'the loneliness of the long-distance housewife' became a staple topic in magazine articles. Two important books to focus on the issue were Julie Rigg's *In her own right: women of Australia* (1969) and Rosalie Stephenson's *Women in Australia* (1970). By 1975, when Anne Summers' best-selling *Damned whores and God's police: the colonization of women in Australia* appeared, the view that women were dissatisfied with the role of mother and housewife was widespread.

Caring for babies and small children certainly could keep a woman isolated. But the picture of all mothers beset by isolation and boredom is only a partial one: the reality was and is more complex, for mothers' opportunities for sociability and support varied enormously according to geographical location and social class.

The image of the isolated suburban housewife, locked in a box-like house away from adult company, was not applicable to Aboriginal women. It was irrelevant, of course, to those communities still remote from European Australia. Closer in, welfare workers observed, 'Aboriginal women are the strong ones, they keep the families together'. Women assumed full responsibility where husbands were absent or unemployed. With income-earning by Aboriginal men hampered by job discrimination, exploitation and lack of recognised skills, many Aboriginal marriages were unstable. As a matter of course, women took other people's children into their homes when necessary. Even among urban Aborigines, the mother-daughter bond remained strong throughout life, and when marriage did break down, temporarily or permanently, a woman could return to her mother's house. In less densely settled areas, where some traditional ways had been retained, female kinship bonds were even more powerful, and childcaring remained a social business for Aboriginal women.

Observers had also to exempt non-English-speaking migrant women from the stereotype of solitary confinement within a nuclear family. Researchers reported the endurance of kinship ties with people in the country of origin as well as in Australia. Rina Huber, studying Italians in Griffith in the late 1960s, found nuclear family households connected for company and support to a community of kin. The migrants accepted a clear sexual division of labour within households, the care of young children being women's work. Children were welcomed and covered with love and affection. Married women saw or telephoned their mothers frequently, and a woman's main source of support was often her sister. Children played around the house, often in the care of older brothers or sisters. Women relied on a mother or sister for babysitting. Similarly, Gil Bottomley found that among Greek women in Sydney kinship networks were crucial, and geographical distance did not necessarily undermine or weaken kinship ties. Coming and going between Australia and Greece was common, and often relatives in Sydney played an important part in a mother's network of family support.

It is mainly the Anglo-Celtic-Australian mother who has been pictured as being isolated, and for some this has certainly been true. But from the 1960s on, researcher after researcher discovered that kinship networks were surprisingly important in the life of full-time mothers. Jean Martin, for example, found vital family ties in both working-class and middle-class suburbs in Adelaide. Relatives within reach commonly provided 'a continuing source of companionship and emotional support and occasional material help in time of need'. Those further away, living in the country or interstate, also continued to exchange services and

*A woman's seat in war, but  
a man's again in peacetime.*

LAND NEWSPAPER  
COLLECTION



Her cares are many,  
her tasks beyond number.  
Every hour, every minute  
She is on duty—  
She sees the children  
off to school,  
She makes the meals,  
and the 'pleas'  
Sees to the laundry  
and the lather,  
fills the shells—  
and the shopping basket,  
a firing business  
these days.  
Cuts sandwiches  
for her man,  
going on night duty—  
and wakes, at once,  
if her child  
cries in the night.  
Tired yet smiling,  
She holds the fort  
of the family,  
the citadel  
of the hearth.  
She has no medals,  
only the pride  
of working and striving  
beside her manfolk  
in a great enterprise—  
to save the homes  
and the children  
of all the world.

The women of Australia are making  
great contributions to the war effort—  
not least of these is what they are  
doing for Savings.

*Motherhood as heroic—in  
times of war.* Australian  
women's weekly,  
19 Feb 1944.



*Aboriginal mother and child, 1977. Reproduced from N. Keesing, The white chrysanthemum, Sydney 1977.*

information, and people did on the whole keep friendly relations with their neighbours. All but the better-off families, she found, attached great value to the willingness of neighbours to give aid when needed.

In one middle-class Sydney suburb, Maila Stevens found that kinship was strong, especially in parent-child relationships. With smaller families, adults had fewer brothers and sisters to rely on, and relationships between siblings were selective. Although some people never or rarely saw brothers or sisters, others retained extremely close attachments. Among adult sisters, especially, this was true. Contact between adult women and their mothers was also frequent: at least weekly for more than three-quarters of the women Stevens interviewed. Grown-up children and their parents typically gave each other considerable financial and practical aid—at childbirth, for childcare, at times of illness, for house buying or paying hospital bills. Family was also the source of much social contact, like weekend visits and outings. Claire Williams found in 1975 that in a Queensland mining town,

about 30 per cent of working-class households had kin close by and were in touch as often as every two or three days. Peter Dwyer, Bruce Wilson and Roger Woock, after studying a Melbourne working-class community in the early 1980s, reported that 'working class people still place ... emphasis on solidarity, both within their workplace and within their neighbourhoods'. Nor were the ties confined to family: links with friends and neighbours were also valued, especially by women who shared the responsibilities of looking after small children. Many such ties were informal, but there was also a marked tendency for young mothers to belong to mothers' clubs and sporting associations.

Sociability and support in new working-class communities were observed by Betsy Wearing when studying mothers in Mount Druitt, in Sydney's western suburbs, in the early 1980s. As the area was a housing estate less than two decades old, most mothers did not have close relatives living nearby. Yet there were almost daily telephone contacts between daughters and their mothers, weekend visits in the family car, and visits at times of illness, childbirth or other emergencies. Grandmothers would stay for days at a time, schoolchildren would be taken to visit relatives in the country in the school holidays. Moreover, the Mount Druitt mothers, cut off from kin during the week, turned to female friends in the neighbourhood for support. Women in the same street shared shopping and childminding, and dropped in for a cup of tea and a chat. Picnics and barbecues with the families they knew in Mount Druitt, perhaps the wives of their husbands' workmates or soccer club members, were also part of social life. About half the women, especially those without relatives nearby, joined mothers' groups.

The mothers of middle-class suburbia in the 1980s also valued neighbourhood sociability, keeping in frequent contact with their own mothers and sisters, although relying less on them for support than their Mount Druitt counterparts. Mothers in Sydney's north shore, for example, relied on female friends drawn from a wide variety of sources—schoolmates, work acquaintances, neighbours, voluntary organisations, or meetings through their children. Often having their own car during the week (as the Mount Druitt mothers usually did not), these middle-class mothers could keep in contact with a wider variety of women over considerable distances. The main difference was that for the north shore women, wealth increased both their geographic reach and the numbers of ways they met other mothers. Jean Martin had noted similar class differences in Adelaide.

In all suburbs, most of the support available to mothers had to be created by themselves alone or in association with other women. There were few publicly provided services. In particular, occasional and emergency childcare services scarcely existed, so that women without kin or friendly neighbours were indeed trapped. During the 1960s occasional care centres were established in some busy shopping areas, but by and large women either shopped with their children or left them with a relative, neighbour or friend. The main source of support in caring for children was probably the preschool centre or kindergarten, yet these centres served only a minority of children.

The war had led both to expansion and contraction of preschool services. In Western Australia and Queensland, preschools were closed, on military advice. In Western Australia, morning radio programs for children under five were substituted, and from May 1943 'Kindergarten of the Air' was broadcast nationally by the ABC. It became popular with mothers at home, continued after the war, and was taken up by television in 1957. A few preschools existed for working-class children, especially important being the Lady Gowrie centres, model kindergartens funded from 1940 by the commonwealth government in a poor inner city area of each capital city. By then a growing body of experts on early childhood

*A man pegs out the washing: a joke. Australian women's weekly, 15 Sept 1954.*



*WEP (W.E. Pidgeon) jocularly identifies in 1953 the one place where mothers do not lack social contact. Australian women's weekly, 13 May 1953.*

advocated education for preschool-age children to develop their personalities and intellects. Some middle-class women began to organise to achieve these things for their own children, and centres were set up in suburbs such as Cheltenham (1942) and Killara (1944) in Sydney during the war. They were established with money raised by voluntary groups and later gained state subsidies to help pay the (very low) salaries of the kindergarten teacher.

After the war, preschools grew in number largely as a result of local effort. Church halls could often be rented cheaply during the week, and are still in use for preschool and childcare centres. The reliance on local voluntary effort, especially in New South Wales, meant that preschool services flourished mostly in middle-class suburbs. But some groups of poorer mothers in working-class suburbs also managed to get preschools.

In 1949 a committee of about 30 young women was formed in the mining town of Broken Hill to raise money for a kindergarten. As married women were barred from paid employment in the town, the educational needs of their children were clearly the main consideration in these women's minds. For a while the committee's campaign was caught up in political conflict. The Communist party supported the committee, and anti-communists saw the move for a kindergarten as a communist plot. With the recent communist victory in China in mind, 'Chop suey velly good for Broken Hill chillen', said one pamphlet. In fact the women catered for more traditional tastes when they cooked for fund raising. One campaigner later recalled 'making 14 dozen cup cakes for these fairs which was nothing compared to the amount made by others'. They ran concerts and raffles and a 'princess competition', in which children were dressed in organdie frocks as princesses and their attendants and raised money for the kindergarten. The committee made £1200 in a year. The kindergarten was started in a Church of England hall near the centre of town early in 1952. 'We couldn't afford a trained pre-school teacher', one committee member remembers, so 'a girl about 18 years of age took on the job', with a month's training in Sydney. Parents were rostered to help, and the kindergarten was open from 9 to 12.30 each day. Within a year, work had begun on a new building.

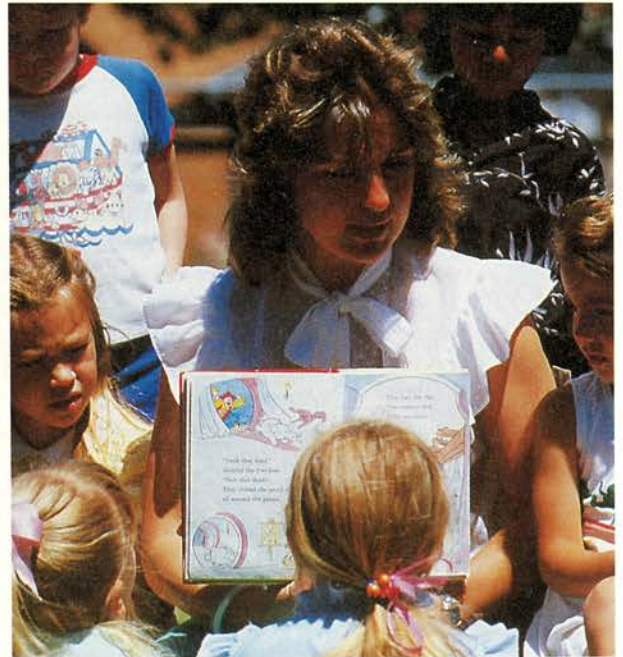


'Kindergarten of the Air.'  
Ruth Fenner conducts the  
ABC's national session from  
Sydney, alternating with  
Anne Dreyer in Melbourne,  
1944. Perth, where the  
program originated in 1942,  
has its own version.

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING  
CORPORATION

Below left.  
Mothers watch from behind a  
one-way screen as their  
children are taught in a new  
experimental preschool, 1940.  
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

Below right.  
Kindergarten teachers and  
pupils in Perth, 1984.  
AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION  
SERVICE



This kindergarten may have been more working class than most, but its story was duplicated in many towns and suburbs over the next three decades. Sometimes the enterprise would begin with a visit from the Kindergarten Union's Mobile Unit, a red van which stayed from 9.30 to 3.30, and which children attended in morning and afternoon sessions. In Chullora, in western Sydney, the van came first to the yard of a private home, then to the Baptist Church hall. Then the hall itself was made available. The mothers whose children attended the unit formed a committee to raise money for equipment. Businessmen donated money and goods and Bankstown Council eventually gave enough to pay the salaries of two trained kindergarten teachers, one for Chullora and the other for another group in nearby Yagoona. The kindergarten umbrella organisations in each state helped these local initiatives with advice, training and general financial support. Local councils and state government also assisted a little.

In 1967, when a referendum made Aboriginal policy a federal as well as a state matter and the sentiment for improving the lot of Aborigines was strong, attention turned to the possibilities of preschool education for Aboriginal children. So far they had had little access to such education. Four centres had been established on government settlements in the Northern Territory between 1959 and 1961, and there were also preschools on some mission stations and state-controlled Aboriginal reserves. A national seminar was held on Aboriginal education in August 1967, at the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs at Monash University. A representative from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, an international private philanthropic body, attended, and subsequently the foundation offered to fund new developments in Aboriginal preschool education. Among the most successful of the experimental projects that followed, were the family education centres set up in New South Wales for Aboriginal groups between 1967 and 1969. Parents attended the centres and took an active part in providing preschool education for their children.

By the early 1970s the kindergarten system, rooted in the voluntary, co-operative ideas of the postwar suburban boom, was in crisis, as demand continued to rise and the voluntary organisations could not pay increased wages for kindergarten teachers and assistants, who achieved their first award in 1969. The system had worked only because of the low pay of the staff. Supporters of preschools then conducted a vigorous campaign for more government subsidy, encouraged by a sympathetic public, and pushed the Labor party to include expansion of preschool services in its policy.

Once in federal office in December 1972, Labor established an interim Pre School Committee to advise the government: its prime aim was that of universal preschool education offering several half-day sessions a week to every child. The committee, chaired by Joan Fry, former head of the Sydney Nursery School Teachers' College, reported in November 1973. It proposed that 70 per cent of all three- and four-year-olds would have by 1985 three half-day sessions of preschool each week, while another 12 per cent would have long day care.



A demand for long day care for the children of working mothers had run parallel to the campaign for preschool education. In 1939 there had been very few long day care centres, or crèches as they were then called. If the mother of a child under five went to work outside the home, she had little alternative to dependence on relatives for childcare. During the war married women with school-age or older

children were those best able to answer the call to enter essential war industries. By the middle of 1943, however, when the war effort was at its height, manpower authorities had begun to think about getting young mothers into industry. The Council of Women for War Work had strongly supported this idea, and a group of women, led by the Melbourne teacher Mollie Bayne, advocated it in a pamphlet of 1943, *Australian women at war*. They argued that crèches were urgently needed so that the womanpower of the nation could be tapped, as it had been in Britain and the USA. Waiting lists at the few existing crèches had reached hundreds.

The pamphlet drew attention to the efforts of voluntary workers in providing childcare for women workers: the women of the Melbourne University Patriotic Fund, for instance, had opened four day nurseries by mid-1943. The one at Kew was held in a church hall, took children from two to five and a half years of age for 10s a week, was staffed by voluntary workers, and opened from 7.30 am to 6 pm. A hot midday meal was provided, and a light tea for both the preschoolers and the older children who attended the centre after school. Voluntary initiatives in other states were supported by kindergarten unions and specially formed committees for childcare in wartime.

But this movement was resisted from within the Labor government and by others who feared, as Bayne and her colleagues put it, that 'the extension of day nurseries is a disguised attack on the home'. In the end the Departments of Health and of Labour and National Service did provide financial support for long day care, but only for the duration of the war. Some state governments made similar grants, but Australia did not experience the great wartime increase in childcare provision that occurred in Britain and the USA.

After the war the provision of long day care declined to a few crèches organised voluntarily or run by longstanding groups such as the Sydney Day Nursery Association. Working mothers again resorted to relatives or paid home-based child carers. But the decline was only temporary, for the demand for married women's participation increased in the 1950s and then accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, though faster for women without small children than for those with them. Economic growth and the shift towards light secondary and service industries opened more and more jobs to women. Debate intensified over the morality of their employment outside the home. Would women be used to undermine male wages? Would children suffer?

The work of the psychologist John Bowlby was used to argue that children ought not to be away from their mothers for more than several hours a week until they were five years old. While sessional care at a preschool might assist their development, long day care, it was said, would certainly retard it. Bowlby's conclusions came from studies of children living in full-time institutions, not children attending long day care and seeing their own mothers in the evenings and at weekends. But only in the late 1960s did defenders of childcare centres make that point in public. The poor image of long day care, together with a continuing shortage of good childcare centres, dissuaded many mothers from using them. For most women, income earning had either to occur in the home itself or be deferred.

There were various traditional methods of earning at home—taking in sewing, laundry or ironing, boarding lodgers or looking after children needing foster care. Married women used the household and its surrounding land as an economic resource even in urban areas, growing and preserving vegetables and fruit, keeping poultry, making their own confectionery, sewing and repairing clothes for family use. Men and children also contributed to household production: men by repairing furniture, maintaining the house or gardening; children by collecting wood, washing up, shopping, gathering eggs, and so on. But it was the married woman



*Some children are luckier than others: at the publicly provided Blackfriars nursery school, 1965.*

NEW SOUTH WALES  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

who traditionally contributed most to the family's standard of living through work of this kind.

By the 1950s economic change was undermining the value of such efforts. For one thing, goods now deemed necessities, such as television sets, washing machines, refrigerators and motor cars, could not be made at home. They could be obtained only by people earning the wages to buy them. Secondly, productivity increased in factories and offices as technology changed, work processes were reorganised and economies of scale were introduced. As the cost of ready-made goods such as foods and clothing fell in relation to family income, it became increasingly pointless to go on making them at home. Jobs were easier to find in a growing economy, and women's wages had risen faster than men's. No amount of home work could contribute as much to a family's standard of living as a second income would.

Women with young children responded to this situation in a variety of ways. Some chose to enter the workforce and sought substitute care for their children. Others chose to stay at home while their children were too young to go to school. Many looked for part-time work, difficult to find in factories but often available for cleaners, clerical workers and service workers. Women with professional qualifications such as teaching were best placed. Not only were their jobs attractive and well paid, but until the recession of the 1970s it was relatively easy to take time out of the workforce and re-enter it later. Women with few recognised skills had narrower choices.

Though it made good economic sense for women to go out to work, the qualities needed to do so included the strength of mind to convince oneself, and others, that it also made psychological and moral sense, that caring for children and earning money were not contradictory activities. One mother wrote in 1975:

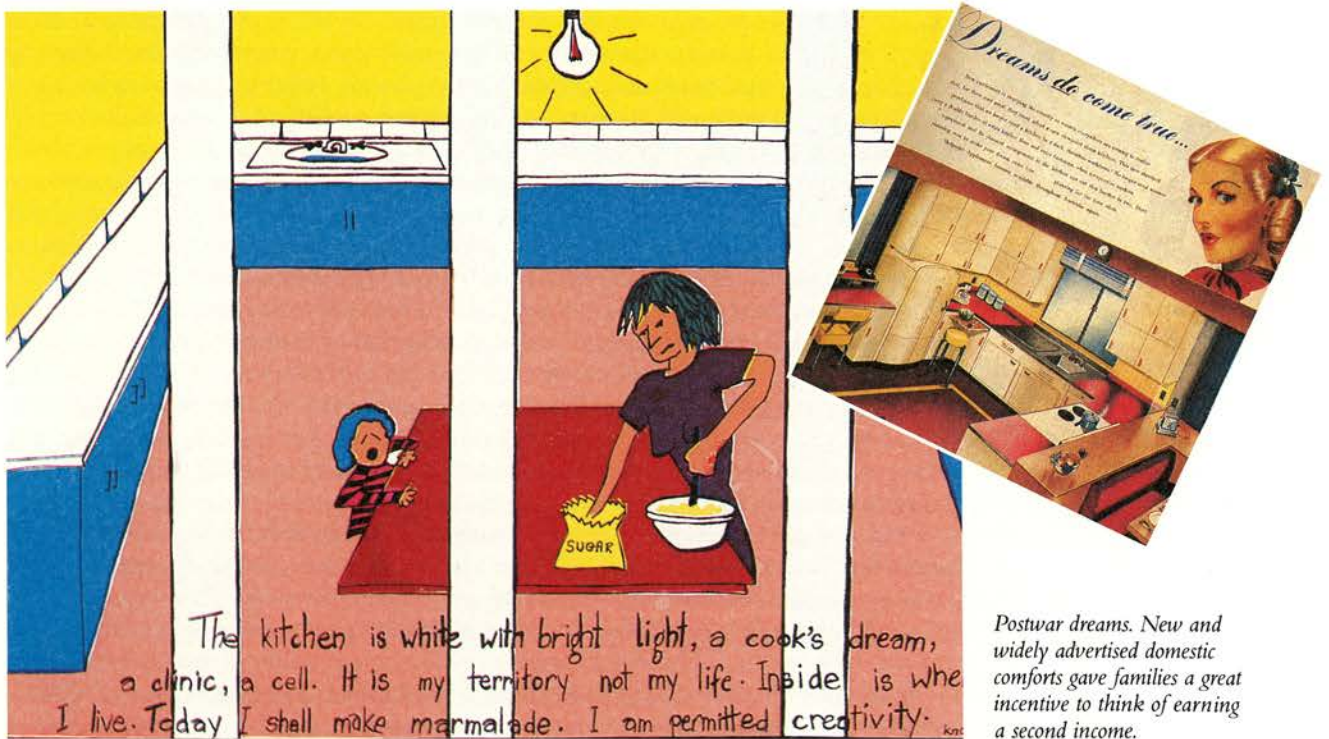
Women are curious creatures. I am thinking of my neighbour and former best friend, Kathleen. As mothers of small children, we shared many a tear of frustration and loneliness. As young wives of struggling bread-winners, we shared many a side of lamb and trip to the markets for cheap vegies. Many's the time I wore her silver shoes to a ball and she my little black dress to that special occasion ... Until the day my youngest started school and I flew off and found myself a part-time job ... As my meagre earnings grew so our friendship died ... when, finally after twelve years of waiting, I saw carpet being laid in my house for the first time and Kath's only comment was 'Of course, if carpet is more important to you than the welfare of your family ...' I realised that our friendship was irretrievably lost.

But the trend was clearly unstoppable. Even during the recession of the 1970s women kept moving into the workforce, especially part-time.

This tendency greatly increased the demand for public childcare services. By the late 1960s many working mothers were using private childminders, commonly in the childminder's home. Waiting lists of 100 or more were common in the nurseries that employed properly trained kindergarten teachers. Often organised on strictly commercial lines, they had reassuring names: Happy Hours Childminding Centre, Humpty Dumpty Kindergarten and Wonderland Kindergarten. Such centres were at least professional and could handle large numbers. Among those who argued for more control with trained staff were employers who could not get the female labour they wanted, the federal government and its Department of Labour and National Service, and women's organisations.

A strong push came from the Women's Bureau established in the Department of Labour and National Service in 1963. In 1968 the bureau published *Children of working mothers*, a booklet arguing that children did not suffer if placed in good day





Postwar dreams. New and widely advertised domestic comforts gave families a great incentive to think of earning a second income.

care. What mattered was the quality of home life and mothering, and the working mother could maintain that. Studies were quoted to show that children of working mothers and non-working mothers were similar in their emotional growth and stability. Happy and secure children of working mothers were cited as evidence by those who pressed the right of married women to work and the need for government-funded childcare services.

In 1970 there were a quarter of a million children under five in Australia whose mothers went out to work. The Women's Bureau reported that only 14 000 of them had places in a childcare centre, and these were mainly in Sydney and Melbourne. What was happening to the others? In response to pressure of this kind, backed by employers and the media, the prime minister, John Gorton, promised that his government would finance more day care, to increase the supply of female labour without harm to the nation's children.

The promise was not fulfilled. By 1972 the supply of childcare places in recognised centres still fell far below the demand. Women's organisations had meantime been strengthened by the coming of 'women's liberation', a revitalised feminism which was hard-hitting in its demand for childcare not only for the benefit of children but as a woman's basic right. Feminists sought the 'socialisation' of responsibility for children, and they saw private childcaring in the home as a form of imprisonment for women and as bad for children. One element in the new movement was the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), formed early in 1972. To all the major parties WEL presented childcare as a right, so much in demand that it could win votes at the election later that year.

During 1972 the McMahon government took up the childcare question. It allocated \$5 million for the building of childcare centres, the first major commitment by a commonwealth government to preschools. In October, the minister for labour and national service, Phillip Lynch, introduced a bill to establish a framework for funding of childcare. The measure emerged, significantly, from

*Above.*  
Australian women's weekly, 10 Aug 1946.

*Left.*  
MEGALO WAGE PAUSE PROJECT,  
CANBERRA

public servants in his own department. Childcare was being provided as part of an overall policy on female labour. The bill, which was enacted, followed existing precedents on preschool education and kindergartens, rather than the traditions of central state planning and funding which applied to ordinary schools. Its central principle was government support to local, non-profit-making initiatives.

With Labor in office between 1972 and 1975 children became a significant item in commonwealth expenditure. By the end of 1973 Labor policy favoured the extension of both long day care and preschool facilities, the first to be available to parents by capacity to pay, the second to be free. The commonwealth spent over \$45 million on these objectives in the 1974–75 financial year, more than four times as much in real terms as in the previous year. The commitment reflected the influence of the new feminism on the ALP. It continued to woo the feminist lobby, appointing Elizabeth Reid, previously a university teacher of philosophy, as adviser to the prime minister on women's issues in April 1973, and endorsing childcare as necessary to enable 'women to participate more fully in society' at its annual conference in July.

When the Liberal–Country party coalition was returned at the end of 1975 it had little choice but to maintain the policy and the financial arrangements developed in the Whitlam era. The situation before 1972, when there was virtually no commonwealth involvement in either long day care or sessional preschool care, could not be revived. Though federal expenditure on childcare was reduced after 1975, services continued slowly to expand. The Fraser government gave wholehearted support to 'family daycare', a cheap service which upgraded backyard enterprises by giving money to co-ordinate and back up paid childminding in private homes. This approach received 23.8 per cent of federal childcare money

*Young Australians at kindergarten, 1974.*  
AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE



(outside preschools) in 1981–82, compared with only 3.4 per cent in 1975–76. Ten thousand new family day care places were funded in this period.

As the provision of childcare of various kinds grew, arguments continued over the principles involved. Some opposed the spending of government funds on childcare services for two-income families. Why should single-income families through their taxes subsidise the wealthy lifestyle of the two-income family? Women who chose to stay at home were keenly aware of the income forgone, an amount much greater than ever before following the Arbitration Commission's decision of 1972 granting equal pay. They argued that those who made the opposite choice, to enter the workforce and seek childcare service, should not expect also to receive government funds. Such funds should be used to help only people who *had* to work, such as single parents or those with an incapacitated spouse.

In 1983 and 1984 the Hawke government increased spending on childcare in real terms to above the 1975–76 level, raised the subsidy for low- and middle-income families, and increased the number of childcare places by almost 60 per cent. By mid-1985 it was clear that the costs of childcare were soaring, and that parents' fees covered an ever-smaller proportion of the childcare budget. The budget for 1985–86 was accordingly cut back, and a more steeply graduated system of parent payment was introduced. In essence, the Hawke government's approach was to increase the availability of childcare while also increasing parents' financial contributions, especially in two-income and well-off families.

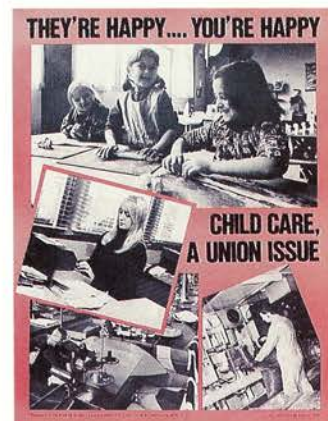
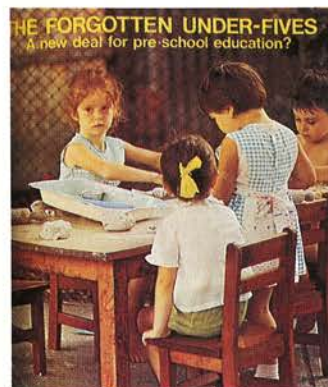
This approach angered the childcare lobby, but pleased others who believed either that there should be no government-funded childcare at all, or that it was right to give larger subsidies only to the very poor. When viewers of the *Midday show with Ray Martin* on commercial television channels across the country were asked on 24 March 1986 to telephone answers to the question 'Do you think there should be means-tested childcare available for all parents?' there were 26 000 calls within an hour, 61 per cent saying 'Yes' and 39 per cent 'No'. The mainly female studio audience was so interested that it continued debating the issue after the show ended. In this impromptu debate, segments of which were shown next day, opinions ranged from those who said a mother's care was best, that women entering the workforce were greedy and neglectful of their children's best interests, or that only children two years old or older should be placed in substitute care, to those who pointed out that some women had to go out to work to pay for basic items such as mortgage payments and household bills. Others argued that children in childcare centres or family day care were as well or better cared for than those at home. Few, however, argued about rights; the debate was couched rather in terms of economic necessities and how best, given those necessities, to serve the needs of children.

At issue in the entire debate since 1972 had been whether childcare was a right (like school education), a privilege to be paid for, a social service to assist the children of the poor, or an amalgam of all three. The debate had shifted a long way since the 1950s, when it had been over whether mothers of young children ought to work outside the home; now it was over whether mothers who did go out to work should pay all, some, or none of the childcare costs incurred in doing so.



The federal government had long been giving parents a little money simply by virtue of their having children. In 1939 child endowment had already been seriously advocated for twenty years, but only mothers in New South Wales

*By 1970 the great majority of the 250 000 children under five whose mothers went out to work had no place in a childcare centre. Bulletin, 4 Apr 1970.*



*A poster produced in 1978 by the Working Women's Centre, Melbourne, expresses the mood of the childcare lobby.*

ANU ARCHIVES OF BUSINESS AND LABOUR



The conventional image, endorsed by soap makers, has Betty aglow with responsible motherhood. Australian women's weekly, 12 Mar 1949.

Right. The good mother as saver. Advertisement for the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. Australia to-day, 1957.



You, too, have someone worth saving for!



Above right. One vision of motherhood, 1954. FAIRFAX PHOTO LIBRARY

received it, and then only for second and later children. Hailed in the 1920s as a method of ensuring that all children were adequately cared for without inflating the wages bill beyond industry's capacity to pay, child endowment had been introduced in New South Wales in 1927. It strengthened arguments for wage restraint and had become a significant source of income for the families of the unemployed during the depression.

Prewar commonwealth governments had not adopted a national version of the New South Wales scheme, despite its potential as a justification for wage restraint, because the commonwealth had little control over wage fixing. With the outbreak of war in 1939, however, conservative attitudes on this and other welfare measures changed. Welfare benefits and services came to be seen as a means of forging the political consensus necessary for the war effort. To compensate for wartime restrictions on wage levels, the Menzies government introduced an endowment scheme in April 1941, providing for the second and later children in all families until they reached sixteen years of age. In this, the government had Labor's support, for child endowment had been a plank in Labor's election policy in 1940.

The level of endowment was increased in real terms by Labor governments in 1945 and 1948, and was extended by Menzies in 1950 to include the first child. This latter intimated that child endowment had ceased to be regarded as a means of supplementing an inadequate basic wage, but had become rather a transfer from childless people to those with children. The scheme was popular because everyone

could benefit from it (there was no means test) and because the payments were usually made to mothers rather than fathers, thus providing for many women their only direct source of income. A public opinion poll in April 1960 indicated 91 per cent support for the scheme.

Child endowment nevertheless gradually declined as a proportion of average weekly earnings. The high point was 1950, when it was extended to the first child. A child endowment payment to a family with two children then represented 7 per cent of average weekly earnings, but from then on increases in the benefit fell behind wage inflation. In 1964 endowment was extended to support children between sixteen and 21 years of age who remained full-time students, a measure intended to encourage longer education and so boost the supply of skilled labour. Even with this change and other increases, by 1971 child endowment represented only 2 per cent of average weekly earnings.

The decline occurred because during the 1960s and 1970s the Liberal–Country party government had priorities more pressing. Women’s groups such as the Union of Australian Women did exert pressure, especially in the late 1950s. So did the ACTU. But endowment never became a major political issue. The government favoured alternative methods of providing financial support for children, using tax deductions for dependent children. The costs were comparable with those of child endowment itself, but tended to benefit those on high incomes.

In 1975 the Henderson Poverty Commission recommended a return to higher real levels of child endowment as the best means of using the government’s financial powers to benefit children in lower-income families. In 1976 the Fraser government carried out this recommendation, abolishing tax deductions for dependants, and increasing child endowment, now called family allowances. As with child endowment, family allowances soon fell in relation to wages and prices. But family allowances continued to be a generally popular social security measure, for their equity and because women received the allowance directly.

Although child endowment once had been recommended as a form of payment for the work of mothering, it was rarely seen in this way by subsequent policy-makers or in public debate. From time to time there were suggestions that full-time mothers at home be paid for the work they did, sometimes to keep them out of industry, sometimes simply to reward them justly. The advocates were varied. The Royal Newcastle Hospital branch of the Hospital Employees’ Union argued in May 1962 that women should be paid to ‘fulfil the full-time duties of “wife and mother”’, and in 1969 the South Australian attorney-general saw payment for mothers to stay at home as a cheap solution to the problems of childcare, just then becoming a matter of political concern. By 1972 women’s liberation groups argued for payment for housewives, not as an alternative to childcare centres but in addition to them—a social recognition of the economic importance of housework and a way of reducing the economic dependence of housewives on a husband’s wage.

No payment to housewives ever eventuated; instead the taxation system was modified to transfer income from two-income to single-income families. People with dependent spouses had long paid less tax than those on the same income without spouses to support, the amount varying with income. In recognition of the fact that the higher the income the greater the deduction the system was changed in 1975 to make the tax benefit the same for people of all incomes. The ‘dependent spouse rebate’ was set at \$500 in 1976–77, and had risen to \$830 by 1982. (It could apply to working women supporting a non-working husband, but in 1980 only 13 000 men were in this situation compared with 2.5 million women.)

The device attracted some criticism. It was a bonus for high earners, whose



*In August 1944 the federal Labor government asked at a referendum for a continuation of wartime powers to enable a range of reconstruction measures. Vote 'YES' propaganda emphasised the commonwealth's constitutional weaknesses, even where some established social services were concerned. The referendum failed. Bulletin, 9 Aug 1944.*

spouses were less likely to go to work than those of low earners. Feminists observed that the benefit was paid to the working spouse, not the one at home, and that it could discourage married women from working outside the home, even part time. The rebate also had significant support, especially from conservative women's groups who saw it as a measure to support the single-income family against growing economic pressures on women to earn a second income, and from recipients who interpreted it as a recognition of the value of housework and childcaring, a limited financial compensation for staying out of the workforce.

Women still living with their husbands were usually much less dependent on the workings of the social security system than were single mothers. Whether single because unmarried, widowed, divorced, separated or deserted, these women were more vulnerable, more dependent on social policy. Moreover, single mothers were increasing in numbers and social visibility in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1939 there had been few such households. Unmarried mothers had usually relinquished their babies at birth for adoption. Deserted, divorced or widowed mothers had difficulty in keeping their children, and generally could only do so if they could rely heavily on kin, usually the children's grandparents, for support. Those without the help of kin had often been forced to give up their children into the care of a state or charitable institution or foster parents. Only those few women with reasonably well-paid skills, or other resources such as a house suitable for boarders, had been able to cope for long periods on their own.

By the 1980s the picture was different. Unmarried mothers much less commonly yielded their babies for adoption. Some women, in unknown numbers, still relied on kin, especially their own parents, to provide shelter and support once a husband had gone. The main solution adopted by unmarried, widowed, divorced or separated mothers was the establishment of an independent household. By the 1970s the single-parent household was the fastest-growing form of all households and there had been an accompanying change in social attitudes. The stigma attached to unmarried motherhood had declined, for the proof it provided of premarital sexual activity was less shocking in a society which tacitly accepted such activity for girls as well as boys. The change in attitude to families where there was only one parent by virtue of separation or divorce can be seen in a shift of terminology from the moralistic 'broken homes' to the carefully neutral 'sole-parent families'.

But the fundamental reason for the increase in such families was economic. By the 1970s it had become economically possible to raise a child on one's own. Statistics showed poverty to be greatest in such households, but at least they could survive. Women had better access to jobs, higher pay, and subsidised and regulated childcare. Yet this is only part of the economic story. By 1975 only 25 per cent of sole mothers had full-time jobs, and another 19 per cent worked part time. The others survived on maintenance payments from the father, or, more commonly, from welfare payments received from commonwealth or state governments. Increasing access to these payments far outweighed any other source of income for sole-parent families.

In 1939 women with sole responsibility for children, and without access to maintenance payments from a husband, had been able to receive emergency help from state welfare departments. Only in New South Wales had they been entitled to a pension. There was a widespread feeling that pensions to widows (who were generally defined so as to include deserted wives) should be available nationally and be sufficient to live on. A commonwealth scheme was introduced by the Curtin Labor government in 1942, drawing on and replacing the New South Wales scheme. As with child endowment, the wartime atmosphere had led conservatives to support social security measures in the cause of national morale. The Joint



*Critics see the dependent spouse taxation rebate as a bonus for high-income earners, which discourages many married women from working outside the home, even part-time. Bulletin, 29 June 1968.*

Parliamentary Committee on Social Security, a bipartisan body appointed by the Menzies government, recommended the introduction of widows' pensions, which had been supported by all witnesses. The aim was to enable widows to continue to look after their own children. Legislation in 1942 implemented the committee's recommendations, using the term 'widows' to include deserted wives and divorcees who had taken reasonable action to obtain maintenance and been unsuccessful, women whose husbands were in mental institutions, and women whose de facto husbands of at least three years' standing had died. Older widows without children also received a pension, in recognition of their low earning capacity.

The widows' pension was gradually increased (the maximum rate was £1 10s a week in 1942 and £4 5s in 1956), and the means test was eased. Yet the payments were still very low, especially for civilian widows with several children. Widows



Ivy Kent MBE (right), foundation president of the Association of Civilian Widows (ACW), with a selection of ACW headlines (left),

Below.  
Mrs Joyce Thurgood, national president of the Association of Civilian Widows, greets Prince Charles at the association's display for the Apex clubs' fiftieth convention, 1981.  
IN PRIVATE POSSESSION

were paid differentially according to whether their husbands died on active service, had given other war service, or had not (for whatever reason) been members of the armed forces. The average income of war widows was double that of civilian widows by the early 1960s. Widows themselves organised to publicise their destitution, and magazines and newspapers sympathetically took up their cause. The Australia-wide association of Apex clubs decided in 1957 to take on the formation of branches of the Association of Civilian Widows as a service scheme. By October 1959 the association had a national membership of 11 000. The campaign gathered pace. A survey in 1962 demonstrated that many civilian widows were living in poverty. One in six of women surveyed said she could not give her child enough to eat. The real value of pensions was raised in 1963 and 1964, but households headed by females still tended to be notably poor.

Most women attempting to survive on a widows' pension had living husbands who refused to or could not maintain their wives and children. In general, a woman could not get the pension unless she had taken the proper steps to secure from the father the payment of maintenance. Yet if the law considered the support of children a father's responsibility, few fathers who were separated from their children took the same view. In practice, the provision of economic support by fathers was closely tied to the father's contact with his children. Where he lived with them, support was taken for granted; where he did not, it was given grudgingly or not at all.

In 1968 the commonwealth widows' pension was extended to newly deserted wives, wives of prisoners, and some unmarried mothers. The old fear of





*As well as assisting the Civilian Widows' Association, Apex clubs take many community initiatives. In 1978-79, for example, more than 500 members from five states worked to build, as a memorial to the International Year of the Child, the 'Magic Castle', a chalet at Smiggin Holes to provide holidays for battered and other needy children.*

APEX ASSOCIATION, SYDNEY HEADQUARTERS

*The new building for the Family Court of Australia in Canberra, 1982, symbolises changes brought by the passing of the act in 1975.*

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encouraging immorality was in decline. Also, in an attempt to restrain the growth of government expenditure on pensions by enabling single mothers to enter the workforce, the Department of Social Security devised a scheme to provide free training for sole mothers to help them acquire skills in a range of manual, clerical and service occupations. In 1973 the Whitlam government extended the payment of pensions to unmarried mothers. With over 100 000 claimants in 1981 (only 5 per cent of them fathers), and the numbers continuing to rise, the cost of widows' pensions and sole parents' benefits became high. In the ten years after 1974 there was a 62 per cent increase in the number of sole-parent families, and an increase in reliance on pensions, in part or in full, from 65 per cent of all sole-parent families to 87 per cent. Lack of access to jobs in conditions of high unemployment was one reason for this rise. Another was a relaxation of the provisions governing the payment of pensions in lieu of maintenance.

In 1959 the variations in divorce legislation from state to state were removed when a uniform Matrimonial Causes Act was passed. There remained, however, confusions between commonwealth and state governments in the wide range of issues affecting divorce, including custody, property settlements, maintenance rulings and their enforcement. Maintenance cases were held in Courts of Petty Sessions, and failure to comply with a court maintenance order could lead to imprisonment or loss of property to the point of bankruptcy. The penalties looked harsh, but they were laxly enforced. Disquiet about lack of uniformity and efficacy and the unpleasantness of divorce proceedings yielded increasing pressure for a new system of 'family law'.

The result was the Family Law Act of 1975 which removed fault as a major factor in matrimonial proceedings, and which prescribed maintenance payments according to the needs of all parties rather than a partner's supposed virtue or lack of it. It established the Family Court of Australia to work with state courts in the enforcement of maintenance orders.

But in 1984, when the Attorney-General's Department formally examined the workings of the new system, it found that in all jurisdictions the procedures for the collection and enforcement of maintenance payments were 'cumbersome, slow and ineffective against a respondent determined to resist the obligations to pay'. At that time only 25 per cent of sole parents received maintenance, over 80 per cent of which was less than \$36 per week, the amount above which the sole parent's pension would be reduced. In other words, fewer than 5 per cent of sole parents received maintenance sufficient to disqualify them from government assistance. On the other hand, some fathers contributed to their children's support not through regular payments but through large irregular payments for special purposes or perhaps by ceding the marital home on separation.

Many women preferred receiving government support, supplemented perhaps by a part-time job, to pursuing their husbands for maintenance payments. In some cases, pensions, benefits or allowances still could not maintain a viable family household. Children were then put under state guardianship.

The placing of children in care often began as a temporary measure and gradually became permanent. The average stay of children in New South Wales substitute care was five years in 1981. Whether in foster care (which 'broke down' in more than half of the cases) or in government or non-government institutions, the children in substitute care generally had lower educational achievement which, coupled with lack of family support, led them to face poor prospects for economic and emotional security as adults.

Given the poverty awaiting the single mother without saleable skills and the stigma and separation involved in seeking substitute care, it is no wonder that many



women stayed in unsatisfactory marriages rather than attempting to bring up children on their own. That was particularly so for those who suffered physical violence. Escape from violent husbands was possible only if there were kin to rely on.

Feminist perceptions emphasised links between women's vulnerability to physical violence and their economic dependence on husbands, especially while they had dependent children. As an alternative to intolerable marriages and physical violence feminists developed the women's refuge, a large house of women and their children staffed by a combination of paid and volunteer workers, with government funding. The first such refuge, named 'Elsie', was opened in Glebe in Sydney in 1974. The idea quickly spread. By 1980 about 100 refuges had been established. They were unable to provide shelter for all who sought it. In New South Wales, for example, 17 per cent of the 5416 women who sought refuge in 1979 had to be turned away. The refuges, and the demand for them, were eloquent evidence of unhappiness and violence in many Australian families.

While domestic violence had long been a condition of existence, the new refuge movement drew attention to it as a matter of public and not simply private concern. Refuge workers and sections of the media sought to highlight the experiences of battered women. The recollections, views and feelings of the women at the Marrickville Women's Refuge in Sydney were recorded in *The last resort*. The problem the refuge movement had pinpointed is clearly outlined by one of them:

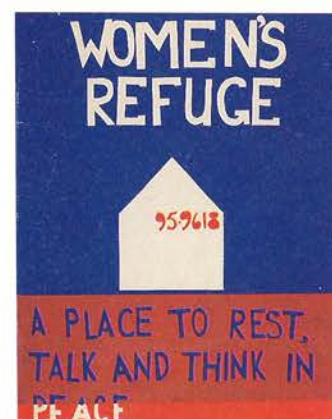
This is the sixth time I've left him. Last time I left him for six months and I still went back to him, because I thought he'd change. But no, he won't change ... If I hadn't had anywhere else to stay, I would have gone back. I would have stayed there till I died.

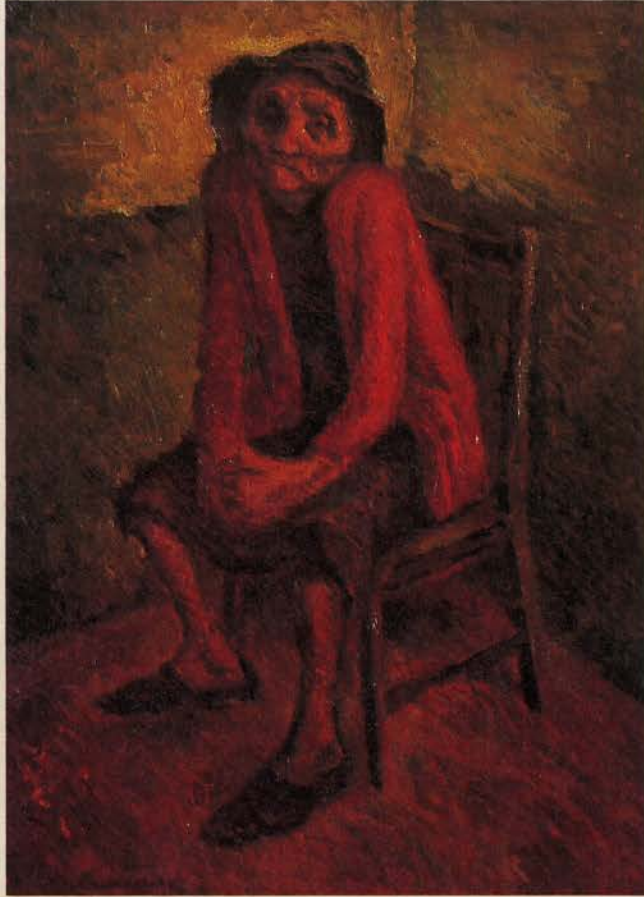
If it was true for women that conventional family life was satisfying when all went well, but a trap and even a private hell on earth when family relationships broke down, for children it was doubly true. Children were both pampered and neglected, nurtured and abused. On the one hand, women's energies were centred on relatively few children, compared to earlier generations, and children generally had more access to preschool education, supervised childcare and a reasonable material standard of living. On the other, children continued to be, as they always had been, victims of the stress experienced by their parents. It is hard to assess changes in the treatment of children over time. Statistics revealing high levels of physical violence, sexual abuse and other cruelties in modern Australia are partly a product of greater public curiosity. But the problems themselves are real enough.

The feminist critique way had contributed to growing public acceptance of measures such as benefits for supporting mothers, subsidised childcare, and women's opportunities to work and to earn equal pay. Yet the economic circumstances persisted which made two-parent families by and large so much more secure than one-parent families. Partly because it was so difficult to rear children alone, family and kinship relations continued to be highly prized, despite greater awareness of their problems. A survey conducted for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1986 showed that when asked which of the following—family, leisure time activities, friends, work, religion, and possessions—gave them the most satisfaction in life, 70 per cent of respondents (76 per cent of women and 64 per cent of men) said it was their family. Only 7 per cent listed friends. Australia had become not the alienated individualistic world shorn of kinship ties depicted by some sociologists, but rather a society in which more complex, more variegated patterns of human relationships were available to people dealing with the problems of economic constraint and inequality.

*Women protest outside Parliament House, Canberra, about inadequate funding of refuges, 1981.*

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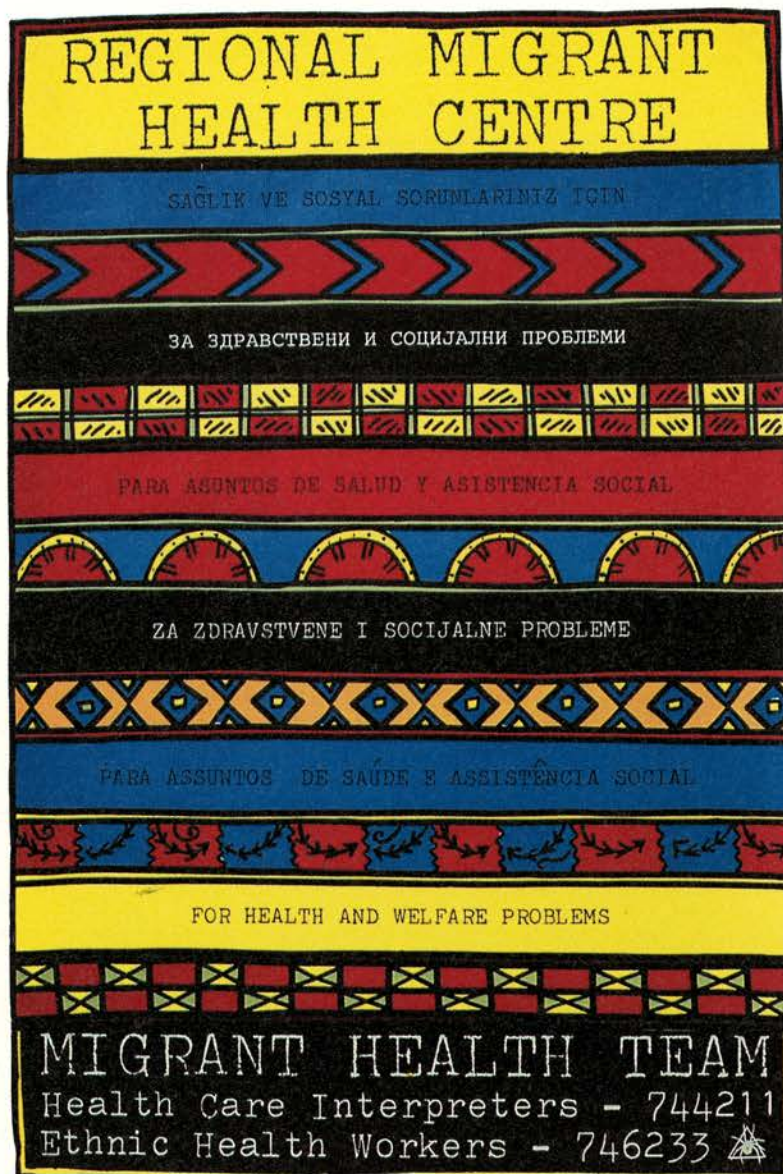


In the waiting room. *Oil painting by Noel Counihan, 1943.*  
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

VI  

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SICKNESS  
AND  
HEALTH



*In the Illawarra region, posters carry the message of community health to non-English speaking migrants.*

REDBACK GRAPHIX