

Cuts to sole parent benefits are human rights violations

March 30 2017, by Beth Goldblatt



Credit: Tatiana Syrikova from Pexels

Sole parents in Australia are economically vulnerable and are experiencing ongoing cuts to their social security. Legislation limiting welfare benefits that was rushed through the Senate last week will make

many of them poorer – but how is this a human rights issue?

Australia is party to many United Nations human rights treaties, including the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). The covenant contains a right to social security, which countries owe to everyone. It requires countries to guarantee that the rights in the covenant are upheld without discrimination.

The UN [committee](#) responsible for this treaty has explained that social security must be:

"... adequate in amount and duration in order that everyone may realise his or her rights to family protection and assistance, an adequate standard of living and adequate access to health care."

The committee has stressed the principle of "non-retrogression" applies under the covenant. This means that countries may not remove rights that have been developed over time and on which people have come to depend.

A country can only reduce [social security benefits](#) if it can justify doing so after consulting affected groups, considering alternatives and avoiding discrimination against particular groups, and harmful impacts on the realisation of the right to social security.

The government will breach the rights discussed here as a result of its cuts to benefits in the [Social Services Legislation Amendment Bill](#). The bill arose because the government refused to introduce an improved childcare package without parliament [finding budget savings elsewhere](#). It looked to welfare, the area of the budget supporting the poorest Australians, to fund the childcare measures.

The [A\\$1.6 billion](#) that these cuts generate for government are being

shaved off the already inadequate support for struggling families. The legislation follows various attempts by the Coalition government since 2014 to reduce the welfare budget by removing benefits from young people, parents and other groups already facing financial hardship.

These have met with significant opposition from the public and in parliament. The [government insists](#) families will not be worse off.

The latest changes, while certainly less harsh than earlier legislative attempts, will still have negative impacts on students and other vulnerable groups, particularly low-income families. The Family Tax Benefit indexation freeze means that while the cost of living rises, [family](#) payments will fall further behind as families effectively become poorer.

The bill also denies parents income support for seven days by imposing a one-week wait before accessing parenting payments.

Lastly, it freezes indexation of income-free areas for parenting and unemployment payments. This means recipients who work will start losing their income support payments sooner.

Worryingly, the government has not indicated whether it will still proceed with some of the suspended cuts to supplements – such as Family Tax Benefit, education and energy supplements – that it previously attempted to legislate.

The measures will worsen [child poverty](#), which is already high in Australia. Forty percent of children in sole-parent households are living below the poverty line.

Since more than 90% of sole parents are women, the measures will have a discriminatory impact on this disadvantaged group and their children.

Families with children in high school who do not benefit from childcare increases will be hundreds of dollars worse off in the next two years.

The Australian Council of Social Service, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the National Council for Single Mothers and their Children, and the author of this article have written to the experts mandated by the UN to deal with extreme poverty, and discrimination against women, to report on this violation of Australia's human rights commitments.

The correspondence points to the retrogressive impact of the new laws and previous laws on the right to social security, coupled with violations of the right to non-discrimination. The [social security](#) benefits are already not adequate for the needs of sole parent families facing hardship in this wealthy country.

The current bill follows earlier [budget savings](#) measures [introduced](#) by the Labor government in 2013. These moved thousands of sole parents off existing payments onto the lower Newstart, resulting in significant reductions to their benefits. Parliament's [Joint Committee on Human Rights](#) found the government had not demonstrated that the cuts were compatible with human rights.

[Single mothers](#) affected by those cuts have pointed to a range of negative impacts. These include: rental stress; growing financial insecurity and hardship; stigmatisation of their children; inability to enrol their children in sport and community activities or to pay for school excursions; psychological stress impacting on their health and capacity to work and study; and shame at having to ask others for help.

A 2012 letter by the welfare groups listed above resulted in [UN experts calling](#) on the government to justify its apparent rights violations. The call went unheeded.

The new cuts are being brought to the attention of the international experts to put on record the [government](#)'s ongoing violations of Australia's [human rights](#) commitments and to ask them to intervene on behalf of sole-parent families facing growing poverty and inequality.

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