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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Submission to Senate Inquiry into Parents Next

Feminist Legal Clinic Incorporated is a new community legal service that works to advance the human rights of women and girls through a combination of targeted casework, community legal education and law reform work.

We welcome this review of the Parents Next program, although we note its very unfortunate timing, particularly for mothers, with submissions having to be prepared over the school holiday period. Accordingly, we will keep our comments brief.

As most single parents are mothers, this program disproportionately impacts on women and we will address our comments in relation to the Terms of Reference using appropriately gendered language.

1) Are the aims of Parents Next appropriate?

If it is in the interests of the community to further demoralise, disempower and impoverish single mothers and consume their time and energy with meaningless and soul-destroying bureaucracy, then this is an effective and useful program. It has the potential to simultaneously harm both women and children, particularly those who are already most vulnerable. However, if it is not the aim to infringe the human rights of women and children by imposing oppressive regulations and punitive responses for non-compliance, then we would suggest the program should be scrapped forthwith.

2) Is the design and implementation of the program appropriate?

From all accounts this program is costly to the community and intrusive and stressful for participants. When combined with the manifest inadequacy of welfare payments, this program effectively functions as as a major disincentive for women contemplating leaving violent and abusive partners. Who would risk throwing themselves on the mercy of an equally abusive State?

If a husband dictated every aspect of a woman's parenting, even whether she attended Story Time with her child, and withheld financial support if she disregarded his wishes, we would advise her that this is controlling and coercive behaviour and a form of domestic violence. However, this program reinforces the message that women are not to have any autonomy but should be ruled by a patriarchal guardian in one form or another.

By undermining a woman's confidence in her own ability to make even the simplest decisions for herself and her children, this program guarantees the low self-esteem essential for long term unemployment.

3) Is the Targeted Compliance Framework appropriate?

Penalising women for attempting to mother their children independently of a man's support has many benefits for a government keen to continue thumbing its nose at its international human rights obligations:

- i) It forces more women to remain in relationships with men who are violent and abusive;
- ii) It restricts women's access to the resources and confidence needed to re-enter the paid workforce at a level that would pose a threat to male interests;
- iii) It impoverishes and disempowers women and consumes their energy so that they have no time to consider engaging in the political activism needed to challenge the patriarchal state;
- iv) It creates difficult and stressful circumstances in which to raise children, helping ensure sub-optimal outcomes that can be used to condemn single motherhood and preserve the patriarchal status quo.
- v) It reinforces a view that raising children does not constitute real work and women must be quickly herded into the paid workforce to earn their keep.

As such this program is damaging and insulting not only to single mothers in receipt of welfare benefits, but all women as well as the children who are not regarded as worthy of prioritisation. According to Article 23 of the Declaration of Human Rights: "everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration". However, clearly "work" is still not regarded as encompassing the invisible but essential domestic and care work carried out by women around the globe.

Strong mothers are needed if we are to have safe children and happy communities. However, women are not empowered by programs that undermine their ability to mother confidently and instead waste their time answering to an inept and patriarchal bureaucracy.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this important issue. If you require any further information in relation to this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us. We would welcome the opportunity to expand on our submission if required.

Yours faithfully

Anna Kerr
Principal Solicitor