

Mothers encouraged to stay out of work [AU]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Australian mothers have one of the lowest employment rates in the developed world, encouraged to stay at home through generous welfare payments and community expectations, says an international expert.

Dr Peter Whiteford, principal administrator with the OECD's social policy division in Paris, said this needed to change. Australia was unique among 21 countries in the OECD for its concentration of unemployment among people with children.

"Australia is one of the few countries where only half the women with two children have paid employment," he said. "Being a mother in Australia reduces employment compared to men the same age in a much more spectacular way than elsewhere."

Dr Whiteford, formerly in the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, addressed the Australian Social Policy Conference at the University of NSW yesterday.

He believed Australian women should look for work when their children were younger than six to minimise the impact on their employment prospects and wages.

However, he said the Government should not cut the benefits of sole parents as it proposed to do - through shifting them from the Parenting Payment to the lower Newstart Allowance. And it should guarantee them an affordable child-care place.

"In Australia the system has encouraged lone parents and unemployed couples to stay out of the workforce for up to 16 years on benefits; the likelihood of getting a job after that is much reduced," he said. "Child poverty rates fall considerably when lone parents get jobs."

Dr Whiteford, who was not speaking on behalf of the OECD, said Australia's welfare system was in line with most countries in the grouping. It was the most targeted, probably in the world, and delivered reasonable benefits to the poor in a way that minimised the tax take.

But contrary to claims of critics from the right, the problem of "churning" - providing government payments only to recoup them in taxes - was much less in Australia than elsewhere.

In its payments to families with children, Australia was more generous than Sweden. But the system appeared to provide incentives for mothers to stay out of the workforce at a time when a high proportion of marriages ended in separation, intensifying the chances of child poverty and old-age poverty among women.

Dr Whiteford said the challenge was to promote greater employment among mothers without increasing the burden on them.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

Region: Australia and New Zealand^[2]

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