

Young women: poles of experience in work and parenting

Summary

Belinda Probert and Fiona Macdonald

Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT

and Brotherhood of St Laurence

This chapter brings into sharp focus the gendered dimensions of the experiences and aspirations of young adults in Australia. It focuses in particular on the impact of parenthood on young women who, unlike men, have historically had to choose between employment and parenting for significant periods of their lives.

The chapter reports on a small-scale qualitative research project designed to provide insights into the ways in which young women plan and negotiate the place of motherhood in their lives, particularly its relation to paid employment, education and economic independence.

Educational attainment and occupational status have a major impact in shaping women's experiences of and attitudes to motherhood. However, while there has been a polarisation in the experiences of young women, this study provides no evidence to support the notion that those from disadvantaged backgrounds look only towards a traditional mothering role. In fact many young mothers who participated in our discussions, in particular single mothers, were strongly committed to their future role as breadwinner or provider and they were determined to equip themselves properly for this. By contrast the young women embarking on careers in professional and management occupations planned to defer parenting for many years, believing they would have to make a choice between rewarding work and motherhood.

Parenting is an issue for all women, not just young mothers. The polarisation of work and parenting experiences around class and education lines is having both negative and positive consequences for women at both ends of the spectrum. The framework for public debates about work and mothering has been one of 'choices' and within this, conventional definitions of motherhood have remained relatively unchallenged. For young women with few labour market credentials the framework is inadequate and the 'choice' in favour of motherhood is not a real choice; it is deeply shaped by class and socio-economic status.

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to bring into sharp focus the gendered dimensions of the experiences and aspirations of young adults in Australia. This chapter picks up on these gendered patterns, but it focuses in particular on one critical factor in the gendering of young people's lives, namely the differential impact of parenthood on young women and young men.

Many more women in their early 20s have dependent children than do men of the same age (19 per cent compared with 5.8 per cent - see McClelland & Macdonald in this volume) and, as Vanden Heuvel and Wooden note in their chapter, it is the presence of dependent children that creates a major gender divide in the labour market participation of young Australians. Young men and women without dependent children have extremely similar levels of labour market participation (87.1 per cent and 85.4 per cent respectively in 1997). However, for those with dependent children the difference between the sexes is very large, with 94 per cent of young men with children being in the labour force but only 38 per cent of young women with children. 13.8 per cent of young women are neither in the labour force nor in full-time education, compared with 5 per cent of young men, and this is again assumed to be linked to women's involvement in parenting (see Vanden Heuvel and Wooden in this volume).

Education participation is also linked to parental status for both young men and women, but parental status is again significantly more important for women than men. Thirty three per cent of young women and 29 per cent of young men without dependents participate in education compared with 8 per cent of young women and 13 per cent of young men with dependents (ABS unpublished labour force data, September 1997).

The importance of parental status in creating gender difference is also revealed in patterns of Department of Social Security (DSS) payments to 20-24 year olds. DSS payments to young men are 90 per cent labour market payments, compared to 57 per cent for women. Thirty six per cent of DSS payments to young women are for single parenting payment compared to 1 per cent of payments to young men (McClelland & Macdonald in this volume).

Much writing on the subject of young mothers defines them as at risk of poverty, and in need of income support because of their withdrawal from education and employment just at a critical moment in the transition from school to economic independence. It is common, however, for these problems to be seen as the result of inappropriate choices being made by young women and girls. While there are immediate risks associated with the austere levels of income support provided, our interviews show how inadequate a view this is, and suggest that the experience of motherhood can also sharply increase young women's commitment to education and career development.

At the same time we are interested in the way motherhood figures in the future plans of women commonly defined as highly successful, and the attitudes that may lie behind the growth of childlessness among older career-oriented women.

In this research we have confined our focus to women because it is widely recognised that parenthood has far more impact on women than on men in terms of long term

employment and education experiences. Very few young men see becoming a father as inhibiting their access to education or work. Women, by contrast, have historically had to choose between employment and parenting for significant periods of their lives. The gendered impact of parenting is not confined to those who have in fact become parents between the ages of 20 and 24, but has a major impact on the plans of young women who are consciously postponing family considerations in order to make a career.

Research design and methodology

This chapter reports on a small scale qualitative research project designed to provide insights into the ways in which young women plan and negotiate the place of motherhood in their lives, particularly its relation to paid employment, education and economic independence. Young women do not have homogeneous attitudes to or experiences of motherhood. Indeed, it seems likely that there has been a polarisation in this area on the basis of class, and that educational attainment and occupational status now have a major impact in shaping women's experience of and attitudes to motherhood. Aggregate data that focuses on the average age at which women now have their first child, or on the increasing numbers of mothers with young children who are in the labour force hide major divisions between the top and the bottom of the socio-economic status ladder, and increasingly divergent patterns of work and parenting (Probert 1997a).

Our purpose was to elucidate the ways in which young women perceive the choices open to them, paying particular attention to the way feminine identities are constructed around the spheres of work and family. To do this it was necessary to talk to young women at some length in a relatively unstructured format. Given the time and resource constraints for this project, group rather than individual interviews were conducted, and the approach we adopted entailed purposive sampling whereby participants for each group were selected on the basis that they shared a particular and distinctive pattern of experience in relation to education, paid work and parenting. In addition to parental status, we thought it important to distinguish between women who are parenting alone and those living in couples. Earlier research has indicated that women's perceptions of their role as mothers can be strongly influenced by their marital status, with sole mothers stressing the importance of being 'providers' for their children (Probert with Macdonald 1996).

We decided to focus both on those groups of young women widely assumed to be most vulnerable in these respects, and those widely assumed to be the major beneficiaries of recent changes in education and employment. This would also shed light on the question of an increasing divergence or even polarisation in women's lives.

At one end of the spectrum we interviewed two groups of young single women who are taking advantage of the growing demand for professional and managerial skills in the labour market – a group of university students studying human resource management subjects, and a group of recent graduates in public relations, all working in demanding jobs. The other groups were selected on the basis of their assumed vulnerability in the labour market: those unemployed, in part-time or insecure employment, and young mothers, both single and in couples, who were either outside the paid workforce or in

insecure employment. The majority of the participants in these groups had left school early, or had little or no post-school training¹.

We interviewed 7 groups of young women, a total of 32 individuals, whose ages ranged from 19 to 25. Ten of the eleven women in the student and graduate groups had commenced their degree courses immediately after completing Year 12 while one woman had completed a TAFE course in business studies before gaining entry to university. While all but three of these highly educated young women had attended non-government (mostly Catholic) schools, their parents' backgrounds and occupations were diverse and included Southern European immigrants who had left school at 14, farmers, fathers with their own companies, and teachers.

Among the other 21 women we interviewed, 17 were mothers, of whom 16 had pre-school-aged children. Eight of these lived with a partner or husband. Seventeen of the 21 left school before completing Year 12, and, while two had attended Catholic girls' schools, the others had attended government high schools. Like the university groups these women came from a diverse range of backgrounds although fewer of their parents worked in professional or managerial occupations². Four of the 21 women, including three mothers, had not returned to study at all since leaving school. All the others had, at some stage, returned to study at TAFE, either to complete high school or to undertake other formal training. The studies the women had completed or were currently undertaking included Year 11, Year 12, a two-year beauty consultants' course, certificate courses in welfare and justice studies, a strapper's course, an adult literacy program, a photography diploma, an accountancy diploma and a teaching degree. Half the mothers interviewed had become pregnant as teenagers and the majority of mothers who had returned to formal studies had done so after having their children.

Experiences of and attitudes to motherhood³

In many European countries there has been a decline in the rate of teenage pregnancies, and this has been paralleled by the rising average age at which women give birth to their first child (Kiernan 1995, p. 3). In Spain, Italy and France, for example, the teenage

¹ The student and graduate groups were recruited through a university and we made contact with the other women through a material aid service, a group training company, a support service for young mothers and an employment service provider.

² These included a father who was an accountant, another who was a journalist and a mother who was a teacher and another an occupational therapist. Other fathers included a number of tradesmen and there were also several immigrants who had left school early and worked in blue-collar jobs. Among the partners of the eight women who lived in couples were a self-employed handyman, a storeman, a security supervisor a painter, a glazier and a diesel mechanic.

³ In this section we refer to several studies of teenage parenting, despite the focus of this paper on 20-24 year olds. This is because several of the young mothers we interviewed had in fact been, or were, teenage parents, and we are interested in their life histories as well as their situation now. Reviewing current research on young mothers we found that only teenage mothers have received any sustained attention, with relatively little being known about young women who become mothers after several years in the labour force.

fertility rate⁴ has dropped from around 20 (just above and below) in 1980 to around 10 in 1993.

The average age at which a first child is born has also gone up, particularly since the 1980s, and there is growing evidence of increased childlessness in the UK, with 20 per cent of those born in the 1950s having no children in their mid 30s compared to only 10 per cent of those born in the 1940s (Kiernan 1995, p. 1). In Australia, among women aged between 45 and 59 the highest rate of childlessness is among those in professional and para-professional occupations (17 per cent), and those with a bachelor or higher degree (21 per cent childless compared to 7.7 per cent of those with no post-school qualifications (ABS 1994).

These general trends nonetheless mask very wide variations between countries. In the UK and the US, in particular, a continued high rate of teenage fertility has been the subject of major concern. In the US the rate was in the mid 50s in the early 1980s, but actually rose to over 60 in the early 1990s (Anderson 1993). In the UK the rate also rose from the low 20s in 1980 to the mid 20s in 1993 (Kiernan 1995, p. 3). In Australia the rate has fallen, but still remains considerably higher than nearly all other European countries, going from 28.2 in 1981 to 20.1 in 1996. The decline in the fertility rate of 20 to 24 year olds has been sharper, falling from 107.5 in 1981 to 64.6 in 1996 (ABS 1996).

In all three English speaking countries the issue of young mothers has been the focus of considerable political debate. On the one hand, young mothers have been the subject of concern because they tend to be women with relatively low levels of education from low income homes, and they are more likely than older mothers to have a baby before establishing a partnership or marrying (Kiernan 1995; Montague 1991). On the other hand, there has been in all these countries an even greater public campaign of criticism, aimed particularly at young single mothers, suggesting that this group consciously choose motherhood as a passport to a social security income, 'planning careers in motherhood at the taxpayers' expense' (Milne-Home et al. 1996, p. 14). In Australia, single mothers were added to One Nation's 1998 list of targets for the withdrawal of government payments.

From a slightly less judgmental perspective it has also been argued that there is a link between high levels of unemployment and an increase in ex-nuptial births. Montague argues that there is no statistical evidence to support this relationship, but that smaller scale studies in the US and in Australia do indeed suggest a relationship between unmarried parenthood and poor employment opportunities (1991, p. 31). Montague's small number of qualitative interviews with young single mothers led her to conclude that 'the fact of high unemployment rates among teenage girls enhances the likelihood that the most disadvantaged among them ... may consider the status of mother as one of the limited options open to them'. (1991, p. 50). Such arguments are supported by a 1984 study of teenage parenting in the Mt Druitt area of Western Sydney, which found that in this low socio-economic status area it was increasing, in contrast to the national decline (Clark 1984).

We interviewed four different groups of young mothers from the outer Southern and Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, expecting two groups of single mothers and two groups of mothers with partners. In the event this distinction proved too dichotomous. The

⁴ Live births per thousand of the female population in that age group.

situations of these young women included: living with the father of their child while no longer being their partner; having absolutely no contact with the father; being engaged to a man who was not the father of their child; living with their previous partner's mother; living with their own mother; being married to the father of their children, or living with him.

For none of these mothers had the pregnancy been planned, nor did these young women talk about choosing motherhood as an 'alternative' to education or employment. Judy (21, single, 3 year-old son), for example, explained that 'she wasn't really a baby person. I wanted my mother to have them'. She had never imagined herself as a single parent, 'never in my wildest dreams' - a comment that drew nods of agreement from the other mothers present. Sarah (23, living with partner, children aged 2 years and 9 months) commented: 'I didn't plan to have kids at all. I wasn't going to have kids 'till I was 30', while Julie (22, living with partner, 2 month-old son) had changed her mind over the years:

From the age of 15, 'I want a baby, I want a baby'. But when I got to about 19 I thought, 'When I'm 30-35, Yeah, I'll do it'.

These responses are similar to those reported by Milne-Home et al. in their study. Of the 41 young mothers who participated in their workshops, not one 'indicated that the first pregnancy had been planned', though several had clearly planned their second (1996, p. 124). Similarly Littlejohn's 1996 study found that only 12 per cent of young mothers in her sample had planned their pregnancies (p. 138).

The meaning of motherhood

Milne-Home et al. agree with earlier research findings 'that pregnant and parenting adolescents have limited their options before employment or vocational training starts; definitions of 'self' as career woman were never incorporated into notions of identity' (1996, p. 2). But our interviews do not support the notion that young women from disadvantaged backgrounds will 'look little further than their traditional mothering role' (Montague 1991, p. 57). On the contrary, we found a significant difference in the response of the single mothers and those in relatively stable partnerships, with most of the young single mothers revealing not only a strong commitment to their future role as breadwinner or provider, but a determination to equip themselves properly for this.

But if I'm to go back to school, I really want to finish. I don't want to stay on a pension for the rest of my life. I hate it. It's not enough. If I persevere for a year or two, with different child care, school time, and make the most of it when I'm with her, then she's going to have a better life and so am I, because I'm going to earn my own wage, and it's going to be a lot more than what I'm getting. (Vesna, 19, single, 15 month-old daughter)

Vesna always knew she wanted to be a social worker, and that helps provide focus to her desire to 'earn my own wage'. But some find this focus as a *result* of becoming mothers. Sarah had had no idea what she wanted to do at school. She found herself aged 23, with

two children under 3. In the midst of this she now knew what she wanted to do and she planned to work full-time in the longer term.

I'm doing an accounting course ... and I didn't really want to sit at home. [The course is] 6 years... I've always enjoyed Maths and Accounting; it's something that I enjoy and I want money too. I didn't decide my plan until after I had the children. ... I was bored with my life so decided that I wanted to do something.

Judy (21, single, 3 year-old son) was motivated by having her child – 'you've got to prove more because you're young and single'. And being pregnant made Steph (22, single, 4 year-old son) realise that you need more than 'a shitty job to finance your social life'.

Some single mothers still imagined finding 'some kind of stable man – that I'm told is out there' to marry. However, this was not seen as leading to the traditional sexual division of labour and female dependence. As Tania put it 'I'm not saying I'm this little woman who doesn't want to work and just wants to marry. I'm not saying that'. For the moment Tania was quite clear about her life.

Now I've got responsibilities... Now I have to earn as much money as I can and that probably pushes me more because of my son. Before, I probably would settle into any old job, but now I have to sort of hunt around and I'm desperate for a job.

Vesna too was clear about her need for continued economic independence.

I don't think that - if I ever get married - I don't think I could live off my husband. I can't do it. Even now when I go out with [my boyfriend] for lunch, I have to pay for my meal. I just can't. Regardless of who got the money, I just can't. I can't be dependent. I really think that if I do get married, I'm going to have a job because by then, I want my money and I don't want to have to come to him and say 'Oh look I need money to buy new knickers. I'm prepared to share, but as long as I've got my own income, so we put half/half, that's fine, but not for him to support me. Couldn't handle it.

For others becoming a mother had different kinds of unintended positive consequences, but ones that again attract scant attention in public debate. For many of these young women, leaving school early and becoming pregnant were related in some way to extremely difficult and unhappy experiences in their own families (including abuse, homelessness, drugs and alcohol.) For several of them, becoming a mother had, they felt, 'saved' them.

I had – to put it nicely – a really bad life. It was really sad – without getting right into it – nobody ever cared about me whether I lived or died Since Sally's been born - I can't help the fact that I've got her – but I wouldn't actually turn back the hands of time for anything – because I

love her so much I wouldn't give her up for anything. She's just like totally changed my life. Like given me a reason to live. I could never leave her to be brought up by someone else now. Like I have to make sure I live for her and that she doesn't have the same sort of life and fall into those holes that I fell through in my life, make the same mistakes I did – and I have to be alive to do that. (Andrea, 20, single, 2 year-old daughter)

Potentially I would have been dead I didn't care much about myself [before my child was born]. (Emma, 25, single, 7 year-old son)

Some of these young mothers were also able to capture exactly what it was about their children that had made them feel different about themselves.

I think the one thing that I love most is that no matter what happens, when he grows up he's going to love me for who I am and not for what has happened to me in the past. He's not going to care about anything like that or what I do wrong, he's just going to love me for who I am, I hope. (Julie, 22, living with partner, 2 month-old son)

Exactly the same sentiments were expressed about her son by Tania, who had fled to a women's refuge with her mother in Year 11.

He gives me love and I don't have to do anything to get it....Well, anyway the men I've had in my life, the boyfriends, you have to be nice to them to get love back. Well that's what I mean. He loves me, he talks to me, he just says 'Oh mummy can I give you a cuddle or a kiss?' and all my life I've basically been begging that from the men in my life and here's this little boy that I provide for as best as possible and he loves me to death and it's nice to have someone there for you...I wouldn't have survived had it not been for my son and that's the God honest truth... A lot of times it was so much easier not to live. But for my son and to keep him safe I had to live. (Tania, 24, single, 3 year-old son)

The young mothers with partners whom we interviewed tended to be less focussed on the notion of becoming providers or establishing economic independence than their single counterparts. They were planning to put off employment until their children were in school, and for some the reality of work was very vague.

Basically when he's back at school I'm going to have another one and then after that one is back at school then I suppose I'll have to think about what I'm going to do then. I want to be there for my kids until they're both at school. (Julie, 22, living with partner, 2 month-old son).

For others though, they were already studying to prepare for it, like Sarah above. Jo (21, with partner, 6 month-old daughter) is planning to return to her photography course next

year, and meanwhile was saving from her casual work in the fast food sector. For some, the plans were necessarily very long term. Mandy (24, living with partner, children 3 and 15 months) wants 'to do youth work. Eventually I want to do psychology, but that won't be for a long time until my youngest is in school'. In fact for Mandy waiting was 'a bit frustrating because I'd like to get started and get going, but on the same hand, I don't want to miss out on my children. I really believe a mum should be there. I just have to wait'.

Earlier research involving interviews with older mothers without post-school qualifications who have remained out of the labour force for many years found that many defined their own needs and interests as having to come after those of their children. Such sentiments were, however, accompanied by some bitterness about the way society perceives full-time mothers, and a strong sense of alienation from the world of work. Work had become a place that was incompatible with mothering because it could not make allowances for sick children or school holidays. Jobs that 'fitted around' school patterns were simply unavailable (Probert with Macdonald 1996). Such women were both resentful and objectively vulnerable.

Career commitment and motherhood plans

The two groups of young women selected because of their potentially strong attachment to good jobs and careers saw similar difficulties in managing what they saw as the demands of motherhood and their work plans. None of these women had children, and most of them talked about it as something a long way off in the distance. Not one of them had any intention of 'giving up work' in order to have a family. As Rebecca (aged 22) put it: 'I think there's going to be a decision though. I do think like that [a career, then a family] but there will be a decision where you have to go 'career' or 'baby'.' For the graduates this conflict appeared particularly sharp because they tended to work in young, dynamic and extremely competitive organisations that had never heard of family-friendly policies. As Georgia (22) put it:

Everyone at my work is either single, but no one has children, and you couldn't do the job if you did. It's the sort of job where you are always travelling, you're always somewhere else...and it's not something where you could possibly have children, or you could, but you will never see them; there will be no point.

These young women were ambitious and very aware of the career structures in their industry. Isabel (22) thought that:

the huge difficulty is the time when we want to have our children, when biologically we should perhaps have the window - where we will meet someone and have it, our body will tell us, that sort of window - is when we will probably get the most powerful positions in our lives, and if we

take that time off, there's that risk we'll come back and we've missed the boat.

Even for those still studying, the reality of their imminent careers is beginning to have an impact on their feelings about motherhood. Susan (20), studying human resource management, described her feelings about having children.

This was back at the start of high school where I'll get married and have kids and live happily ever after. But these days, as I'm thinking more into the career and future, I know that I do want to have children and I want to have a family and a husband, but it just keeps going further back. I used to think about 25 would be nice...but now, I'll be in my mid-30s.

For both the student and graduate groups marriage and children were now defined as something desirable in an abstract way, but not in exchange for a career. Tina (21), another student of human resource management put it this way:

I've worked so hard for something and I don't want to throw it out the window. I've always wanted to do something with my life and I don't want to think, Yeah, I'll take five years off, or I'll rely on my husband, or he might be making all the money and I just don't want to sit back doing nothing.

For some of these young women their dilemma stems in part from their fairly traditional sense of what a good mother should do. Kate (22) loves her work in public relations 'and the thought of having to work on 10 different things at once and having to use 10 parts of your brain at once'. She can't imagine 'having a working life and **then** a family life'. 'I think if I took 9 months off to be pregnant and have a baby I would go crazy – I would probably kill the child 'cause I could not spend that much time with something.' Yet a minute later she acknowledges that 'I never want to be one of those mothers who has to get somebody else to pick up my kids from school'. She has fond memories of her own mother being able to pick them up from school because her full-time work involved very flexible hours.

Many of these well qualified young women were unwilling to predict their family futures, and they were interviewed at a stage in their lives when their careers were just about to begin. Nonetheless, the attitudes expressed here reveal the revolution that has occurred in the aspirations of middle class women in Australia since the 1950s and 1960s.

Educational experiences and attitudes to motherhood

The relationship between 'unsuccessful' schooling and young motherhood is now very well established. Australian evidence indicates that '*lower educational achievement is the key risk factor associated with adolescent maternity*' (Milne-Home et al. 1996, pp. 2-3 emphasis in original). In as much as failure to complete schooling is an internationally

relevant factor this raises interesting questions about the comparatively high rates of young motherhood in Australia and the structure of our school system.

Milne-Home et al. review the substantial evidence that suggests that school culture and the curriculum are a problem for some girls, causing them to 'just disappear'. This is in contrast to the young men who are at risk who often commit crimes, becoming 'visible, obvious, and there are lots of programs to help them' (1996, p. 30). The teenage mothers in that study confirmed that, for most of them, school culture was alienating. 'The culture of the classroom for the most part was criticised for being out of touch and out of step with their lives' (1996, p.124).

These findings were strongly supported in our interviews with both those who are currently unemployed and those who are already mothers (a total of 21 interviewees). Most of these women attended state schools. Jo, a young mother whose parents were both in professional occupations, attended a Catholic school before transferring to a high school where she could do photography in VCE. She was one of the few who enjoyed school and commented that 'I think private school is better in Years 7 and 8 because you learned how to study'.

Dissatisfaction about school related to two major themes. The first concerned the perceived irrelevance of much of the school curriculum and acute boredom - of not knowing 'how any of it would help', of subjects being 'totally irrelevant'. The second theme concerned experiences of being 'picked on' or being made to feel out of place. There were also 4 young women who were suffering severe problems at home that made successful schooling impossible.

I left at the end of Year 11. I hated it, hated the structure. There was no choice, I didn't know what I wanted to do. You don't even know why you are doing things. (Steph, 22, single, 4 year-old child, left school after completing Year 11)

I hated the social life, hated the teachers. It just wasn't what I wanted to do. The education system didn't work for me. You didn't head into any particular direction, you just went; you couldn't aim towards what you wanted to do' (Julie, 22, left school at 14 although returned off and on until 17).

While some hated both work and social life at school, some only disliked the work side.

I hated school but I loved the social life too much. I started Year 11 and left in the middle of the semester and wagged nearly a term. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and school wasn't for me. (Sarah, 23, left school in Year 11)

For those who felt that they had been picked on, or made to feel like outsiders, there were several different kinds of reasons, some of which clearly related to their sex.

When I was 13, I was really quite big and I didn't get along with anybody, everybody thought I was a big dork and hated me, and I went back when I was 16 and I lost heaps of weight and was skinnier and what a difference that made. I had heaps of friends and I hadn't changed as a person...It was so much different because I looked more like everybody else and it made a huge difference. (Julie)

I completed Year 10 and just couldn't hack it any more. It was too much, so it didn't help with the amount of stuff I went through there and I didn't get along with anybody, so I thought the best thing to do was just leave and they were really supportive but I wasn't interested in going for my VCE. I didn't have the self-esteem nor the patience to do it. (Sandra, 20, unemployed)

For Megan being very bright in a country high school brought no social reward:

I didn't enjoy it because I couldn't make friends, and I had no friends, and that was horrible for me. But I was good at school. I got great grades, but I got picked on for being smart as well. (Megan, 19, completed VCE, now unemployed)

Not having the right clothes was a part of feeling out of place for two others:

Some families can afford nice clothes and if you can't come out wearing nice clothes, you'll just be the odd one out. It's simple. Like some parents can't afford to buy their kids the high profile clothes on the free clothing days, you'll get picked on. (Sandra, 20, unemployed, left school at end of Year 10)

I didn't like school at all. I hated school. I never had the right clothes and the right shoes.... It was always scary (Lucy, 21, unemployed, left school at end of Year 11)

Andrea, (single, 2½ year old daughter) whose home life was extremely unhappy, said 'I don't even really remember year 11' and talked about being 'off my face' for most of the time. Vesna, on the other hand, found school a welcome break from a very difficult life at home:

I enjoyed school because I didn't have a good family life. To me going to school was just a getaway, and every holiday I didn't want a holiday ... I loved the school I was at ... and I had the best teachers ... we were all friends (Vesna, 19, became pregnant in Year 11 and did not complete Year 12).

The contrast between the experience of the young mothers and the unemployed or insecurely employed young women with those who had gone on to vocationally-oriented

university study could not have been more stark. The latter had gone to a mixture of country Catholic high schools, 'minor' private schools and state schools. For several, including three daughters of immigrant Italian families, they were the first in their family to attend university. What they shared almost unanimously was their enjoyment of school, and the sense of university as the next logical step for any girl who had the ability. As Rebecca (22, graduate) put it 'I was always going to come to uni'. Remarkably few of them, however, left school with a clear sense of what they wanted to study or do.

Tina (21, studying for her degree, with Italian migrant parents for whom an apprenticeship was the highest qualification) talked of school as 'just so much fun'. She went to a Catholic all girls school:

... because all my friends were going there so I'm going there as well, and from Year 7 to 12 we had a party. It was just one big party ...Then mum and dad gave me a word 'your work is falling down', and so when Year 12 came, I put my head down and still had fun, but I thought I had better settle down because I don't want to ruin my life.

For Kate (22, graduate):

I think all girl schools had a big thing to do with it, like I absolutely loved being in an all girl school. I was only at one for 4 years, from Year 7 to 10, but that was the crucial point for me, and then when I went co-ed for 11 and 12 I just hated it.

In reflecting on their own experiences of school, it was possible to see how these young mothers might reproduce their own histories in their children. Kate, whose private school experience had taught her 'how to study' said 'I'll probably send Matilda to private school, to Year 10 at least'. Jacinta had enjoyed her high school until it amalgamated with another one and 'the drugs came in' and worried about her son going to school, and said 'I'd rather teach him myself'. Julie was picked on at school:

When my son doesn't want to do VCE, I'll just say, 'Don't do it!' I did a traineeship and that didn't get me a job when I needed it, and it pointed me in one direction...[I'll say] 'Choose what you want to do and do it'.

School to work transition

Among all the young women whom we interviewed for this project there were very few who had a clear sense of what they wanted to do when they left school. Yet a sense of direction and purpose seemed to be very important in ensuring continued involvement with education and training for those who did not complete Year 12.

Even among the two groups who had gone to university, many spoke of the importance of chance in leading them to management and public relations. Rebecca's enrolment in public relations was explained as 'I absolutely fluked it', with Isabel responding 'Mine was completely by chance too'. Georgia had always wanted to be a PE teacher:

... and I got slightly high marks and thought that PR was this incredibly glamorous course where you went out all the time and had great big lunches and dinners, and so I looked up the entrance exams and just thinking I might, well, just do it because it might be exciting, not expecting to get it, not having done any work experience, and somehow got in. So I had no intention at all of doing it.

Liz 'was going to be a teacher because both my parents are teachers – thankfully I got out of that one'. She 'got pushed into' science subjects at school. 'I don't know why I just didn't think 'If you don't like it don't do it.' She had even started a science degree before transferring to a social work course.

A significant number of young women from all the groups talked about having planned to be a teacher, the quintessential female profession. Judy was still on track, having got to university despite having a baby in year 11, while Tania's changing home situation in her last years of school meant that she 'couldn't go to university with the marks I got and to be totally honest, I don't think I wanted to'.

The range of careers considered by all the young women we interviewed was very limited, as were the perceived options for training for these careers. Only two women had considered apprenticeships, both in hairdressing. Martina, who had come to human resources management via her interest in psychology, had thought about teaching and hairdressing when she was in Year 10, the latter 'because my cousin was a hairdresser and she seemed to like it' and Trish had started a hairdressing apprenticeship but had to give it up when she was pregnant as it was full-time. Only Julie had undertaken a traineeship and this was in office work. At 22 she had done both the things she had planned to do – worked with horses and worked in an office.

Most others who left school early had looked to formal education, a finding similar to that of a recent study (MacDonald, forthcoming) involving interviews with students considered at risk of leaving school early. In this study 'none of the females identified apprenticeships or traineeships as a preferred career path. In fact they did not mention this type of structured training at all during our discussions. For them, completing VCE and then entering university was the only obvious pathway to employment and to realising their career ambitions' (p. 8).

Similarly the young women in our study who had gone straight from school to university had not considered alternative training or education options with many seeing university, as Georgia put it, as 'a natural progression'. While most had known of TAFE, for Susan, it would have been 'the long way around', only to be considered if she had not gained university entry to a tourism degree. Liz, who went to a small private school in the country, 'didn't even know there was a TAFE' and Simone, who went to a co-educational country school said:

Some of the boys were actually doing TAFE subjects as one of their VCE subjects. I don't think it was offered widely. This sounds really judgemental, but its offered to the boys, not the boys who were going to university or the ones who want to go....We didn't get TAFE talks at all. It was all either uni or get a job, or for some people, the TAFE option was given, but very limited.

For some of those who went straight to university the careers advice provided to them in Year 12, when they were choosing their university preferences, was helpful. However most spoke of making their decisions independently. By contrast many of the young women who left school before Year 12 did not feel useful careers advice was available:

Unless you were a scholar you didn't get any advice. (Steph, 22 single mother)

There was a careers counsellor but it was more about work experience. (Emma, 25 single mother)

The tertiary students and graduates were, not surprisingly, very focussed on career opportunities in their choice of university education rather than general education, but within a surprisingly narrow framework. Anne explained why she had considered studying law and marketing before deciding on public relations: 'Of course you want something that's going to go somewhere and there's really only law or marketing'. Several of the students spoke of recognising human resources as a growing area and Susan liked it because she could 'see where it was heading'.]

Among the women who left school before Year 12 those who had always known what they wanted to do had very clear plans of how to achieve their goals and some had made remarkable progress towards them. For example Jacinta (20, single mother, 18 month-old son) had always wanted to work with horses, and she had pursued this on leaving school and had continued to study from home during her pregnancy. Judy (20, single mother, 3 year-old son) had always wanted to be a teacher and after becoming pregnant in Year 11 she completed Year 12 over two years at TAFE and was now at university.

Post school education and training

While the young mothers and young unemployed women whom we interviewed had almost all hated school, this did not translate into a generalised dislike or disinterest in further education and training. On the contrary, we were struck by many of these young women's commitment to completing their education and getting the kind of training required for a 'better job'.

Only Sandra (21, unemployed) questioned the value of further study:

But then when you've done your VCE and go to uni, by the time it comes to actually getting work, you're too old and you haven't got the experience. You may have done the schooling but that's not the same as actually working in the job.

What was most significant in their attitudes to completing their schooling was the importance of TAFE and institutions such as community houses. After having their children, three young mothers had, in a very short space of time, enrolled in TAFE in order to complete Year 12 and another had enrolled in TAFE to complete Year 11. TAFE was not only practical but also attractive to many of them. There they were treated like adults, and their success depended solely on their own self-motivation rather than externally imposed discipline. In addition, study could be undertaken in a far more focussed way, requiring only limited hours and days of attendance. Mandy (aged 24, two children) left school:

...half way through Year 9 and went to a few more schools and never completed Year 10 and went back and did Year 11 at TAFE, and I find that beneficial and it was great ... TAFE, you only pass if you wanted to. They didn't force you to do the work as such, it was your decision ... so that was really good, and not a whole day. I was only part-time and it was like 4 hours, 3 times a week.

I think in high school people treated you more like a little kid, but when you got into TAFE, you're an equal with them. They treat you like an adult. (Julie, left school at 14 then returned off and on until 17)

For Steph the experience of doing Year 12 at a community house with a creche next door was 'fantastic' because she could feed her baby between classes. Jacinta (20, single, 18 month old son) was also able to leave school when the drug scene got out of control and her group of friends were broken up following amalgamation with another high school because she knew she did not need to complete Year 12 to get into her preferred courses. After leaving school half way through Year 11, Jacinta completed a 6 month TAFE course. While pregnant she then undertook another home-based study course. She is currently saving up to buy some land for the horse breeding business she hopes to establish.

For those who only discovered what they wanted to do after leaving school TAFE again provided what was described as a culturally and practically relevant alternative. Sarah (23, living with partner, 2 children), who left school in the middle of Year 11 and got a factory job at 16, discovered several years later that she wanted more out of life. With two very young children she is 'doing an accounting course at TAFE. Actually I decided I wanted to do a Business Management course or something like that because I did a 6 month course ..., and I decided that I wanted to do something so I started Accounting last year'. Sarah knows it will take her almost 6 years to complete the course, but then plans to be working as an accountant full-time once the children are at school.

Many of the single mothers regarded further study as an immediate priority and the key to 'being able to provide' for their children. They managed to attend classes by relying overwhelmingly on relatives, particularly their mothers, and, to a far lesser extent, family day care and child care centres. In contrast the mothers with partners placed greater emphasis on being with their children and were more likely to see further education or training as something 'to do for me', when the children were at school.

I think when they go to school hopefully, I could do something then.
(Ros, 21, living with partner, two children under 4).

Involvement in a community-based drop-in centre for young mothers provided the impetus for post-school study for a number of the young mothers. Michelle (23, living with partner, 3 year-old son) had 'always wanted to be a social worker' and her casual work with mothers' peer support groups had helped to get her started on her career. She was now doing a TAFE welfare course as was another casual worker Steph (22, single mother, 4 year-old child) who had discovered she 'loved training' and 'one-on-one work'. Several others had come to the decision to do welfare studies via the young mothers' support groups but they were less sure than Steph and Michelle about their future directions.

A strong theme which emerged in relation to the career aspirations and study plans of the women who left school early was the importance of making use of their own personal experiences, something which was also noted in a larger Australian study of young women's career aspirations (Johnston 1994). In our interviews, the appeal of welfare and social work studies for a number of young women was that it would be doing 'something you know about'. Also important was direct contact with someone who had provided guidance or support. Lucy (21) was unemployed and involved in a program for young people at risk of homelessness. The example of the program worker who 'was the first person who ever really cared what happened to me' encouraged her to enrol in a welfare course. Anita (24, single mother who left school in Year 9) liked her voluntary work with street kids because 'You can use your own experience and you can use it out there'.

Sources of support and barriers to further training

Among the young mothers we interviewed, a critical source of support was often their own mother, or their partner's mother. Five of the single mothers lived with their mothers and relied on them for child care, while one single mother lived with her ex-boyfriend's mother. Another single mother lived separately but also relied on her mother for child care. Among the young mothers with partners, six relied on their own mother or their partner's mother to a great extent. Most of these young women spoke warmly and appreciatively of the support they had received from their mothers or their partner's mothers. Those who could not rely on the support of their own mothers were clearly at a disadvantage since formal child care was beyond the reach of most. Only two of the single mothers used child care centres for the care of their children.

The emotional support as well as the careers advice and practical assistance provided by community-based support agencies was also important for many of these young mothers and unemployed women. The young single mothers in particular were very aware of negative stereotypes applied to them and spoke of not 'wanting to stand out', being 'paranoid' and of feeling 'huge pressure' to behave differently. After 'reading all the literature' on sole parents Judy felt one of the worst things about being a single mother was the 'guilt'. While the single parenting payment (previously sole parent pension) was viewed as inadequate by most single mothers, it was also the frequent payment reviews by Centrelink that contributed to their desire not to be dependent on it.

I don't think there's many women who want to be on the pension ... You feel like it's not your money. (Steph)

For many of those receiving the single parenting payment or unemployment payments, money was a daily problem as well as a barrier to training. 'That's what each day is now, it's just money; everything is' (Sandra, 20, unemployed). Few of the single mothers lived independently from their parents as it was just not affordable. At 24, with a 7 year-old son, Emma had reluctantly moved back to her parents' (supportive) home because she could not afford to live elsewhere. Anita and her daughter were living in emergency accommodation.] Lucy and Megan, both unemployed and living in the inner city, coped with their rent by living with large groups of other young people. Megan 'could not afford rent on the dole' and saw her only other option as moving back to the country town where she grew up.

For those single mothers studying or planning to study, the cost of child care was a significant problem, something which was noted in a recent evaluation of the JET (Jobs, Education and Training) scheme for mothers (DSS et al 1997, p. ix). Both the partnered and single mothers who had undertaken training had overwhelmingly relied on their families, generally their mothers, only using formal child care when they could afford to. Vesna has absolutely no support from her own parents, but was planning to return to study:

If there wasn't child care and if there wasn't assistance with child care fees, I wouldn't be able to do it because I'm on a pension and a pension is not enough ... (19, single mother, one year-old daughter)

In addition to child care other problem for mothers wanting to study were the location of courses. For Michelle the biggest barriers to further training were 'money and transport' and while Andrea had managed to travel from the outer suburbs to the city three days a week to do her training she had 'had 10,000 nervous breakdowns'.

Despite career aspirations some young mothers were unlikely to undertake further training in the near future while they were focussed on getting by financially. Mandy's partner had a full-time job and a second weekend job and Mandy did casual catering work at night when her partner finished work. They used occasional child care two hours a week but 'it costs through the nose' for their two young children, and otherwise reluctantly relied on very elderly relatives.

Even though my partner works 2 jobs we're \$5 over for a health card, which is ridiculous, and we've got no savings, so we're trying so hard.

Tania, a single mother who had two part-time jobs and received some parenting payment, felt she was in a trap. 'To not have the struggles I need the career. I know what I need to do to get the career but I don't have the money to get the training.' What she hoped for the future was

...to be in a full-time secure job where I don't have to worry what's going to happen next week, where I don't have to worry about where I am going to get the rent money or can we afford extra on the grocery bill, you know stuff like that. Just a full-time permanent position that is stable, and that I'm happy with. And obviously that pays, I mean I'm not greedy but that pays enough and maybe a bit more like to buy a car again.

While studying, most of the graduates and tertiary students had partly supported themselves with part-time jobs. While some received Austudy many had financial support from their parents. Few parents had paid their daughters' HECS fees. If it had been necessary to pay fees up-front, Martina would not have come to university.

A lot of people had 2 or 3 jobs at uni. We had very few contact hours at uni, so we had flexibility and could fit jobs in wherever and doing homework in the middle of the night. (Anne, graduate)]

Employment and parenthood: plans and experiences

One of the most striking findings in recent research into women's labour force participation rates concerns the very different trends emerging at either end of the socio-economic scale. While many observers assume that the changing labour market favours female employment, the reality is far more complex than this. In particular, there has been an even more dramatic loss of full-time jobs for teenage women than for teenage men since the 1970s (73 per cent for women; 60 per cent for men) (Gregory 1995). Gregory and Hunter (nd) looked at labour force participation rates by socio-economic status and concluded that between 1976 and 1991 the polarisation of women's employment patterns was extreme. 'By 1991 the probability that a woman would be employed if she lived in the top 5 per cent of SES [socio-economic status] neighbourhoods was 78 per cent more than if she lived in the lowest 5 per cent SES areas'. They concluded that 'it was a shock to see that in 1991, and for half of Australian neighbourhoods, the average proportion of women employed in the labour market is less than in 1974' (p. 12).

These divergent labour market participation rates do not simply reflect variations in attitudes to parenting, but also real differences in opportunities for work. Overall, degree holders have an unemployment rate of 3.5 per cent in 1997 compared to 12.5 per cent for those who did not complete school, and any unemployment is of shorter duration. Employment opportunities have also been growing strongly for professional and para-professional occupations – by 26 per cent and 7.6 per cent respectively between 1989 and 1996 (Andrews & Wu 1998, pp. 1, 7).

It has been argued in Australia (as well as in the UK and the USA) that a lack of employment opportunities for the least skilled may encourage some young women to focus on motherhood as an alternative source of satisfaction and identity. For single mothers, parenthood has also been seen by some as a potential source of income and independence. Birrell and Rapson, for example, go so far as to argue that young women without post-school qualifications may be increasingly pessimistic about the breadwinning potential of their male counterparts, and reluctant to form enduring partnerships as a result. 'Where dependent children are involved, women also have the austere but reliable sole parent and family payment alternative to fall back on' (Birrell & Rapson 1998a, p. 15). However, apart from numerical data concerning the numbers of single mothers who rely on these benefits, little appropriate research has been carried out that would enable us to say what these women think. Our research, limited as it is, provides no support for this argument.

The fact that some young mothers may also find it extremely difficult to find suitable employment attracts far less comment, probably because it is widely assumed in Australia (and the UK) that mothers of young children ought to be at home with them. Young mothers are indeed far more likely than young fathers to have left the labour force or to be working part-time, but our research suggests that whether they are single or partnered has a major impact on their attitudes to this arrangement. At the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, the growing delay in childbearing associated with well-qualified women is widely interpreted as a positive response to increased employment and career opportunities. However, evidence of increasing childlessness among women in higher status occupations suggests that young women may feel that they still have to choose between work and a career in a way that is unknown to most young men.

Employment experiences

Nearly every young woman we interviewed had had experience of working in what are often known as McJobs – jobs that are casual, part-time, aimed at young people and clearly not intended to be linked to career development. For the university students and recent graduates this was simply the way they helped to pay for their education. Simone was working on weekends in 'a job to get cash', 'I work at Katies...It's not a career option at all, that's why I'm laughing. Definitely not a career'. (Simone, 22, human resources student). Several of her fellow students had two jobs, either in retailing or the fast food industry. Martina had worked since she was 15, and did two jobs while in Year 11 and 12 'that paid for me to buy a car in first year uni' while the part-time jobs Kate had as a student were 'for play money'.

The views of those young women who had left school before Year 12 about McJobs were not dissimilar, though not surprisingly they were more critical of them since they needed far more than 'play money'. Marcie described her feelings about this kind of work before she found help and contacts at a drop-in centre for young mothers in Melbourne's outer suburbs. 'Before coming here I thought I'd end up as a check-out chick'. Similarly, Vesna another very young mother said 'I wouldn't settle for a full-time job now in Safeway. I wouldn't settle for that. I want to finish my school so I have a better job because this is what I prefer to do. Safeway is OK for part-time work, for extra money, but not for the rest of my life'.

Others had worked at fruit picking, and in factories. Sandra, who left school after Year 10 has been unemployed for nearly a year:

I started working at Bi-Lo as a check-out chick; it's probably the worst job I've ever done...Then after that I started working in factories packing clothes, and then in chemicals and we had a great big mishap with them. Basically I was standing in about 2 inches of water and chemicals, dusts, everything; and he knew I was just about to take him to court and instead he decided to come out and sack us in front of everybody. So we got the Health Department to come through and they got closed down.

Women in the 20 to 24 age group were also very aware of the way many low-skill jobs were reserved for juniors. 'People want cheap people. They want 16 year olds, 17 year olds, but that cuts out half the jobs'. (Tania, 24, single mother) Or as Sarah put it, 'I think a lot of employers now look for somebody that's young, who lives right next door to the job, and has about 3 years of experience! They want something that's just not there'.

The unemployed or insecurely employed women without post-school qualifications who were looking for jobs spoke with some bitterness about the need for experience once they reached adult wage rates:

I find difficulty in the way that people actually give me a chance to get in, actually get experience. I keep ringing up, sending resumes away, like calling, but 'Sorry, no experience', and I don't like it. (Debbie)

Money mainly, and the great experience thing. They're not willing to take you on if you haven't got any experience. Its unreasonable. They expect you to have that much experience if you're just fresh out of high school and haven't experienced life, let alone experienced working. (Megan)

Sandra has had factory jobs and the dreaded Bi-Lo check out work, but has been unemployed for nearly a year:

So it's been absolutely hell trying to find a job at the moment. I've been to case managers and Centrelink hasn't been helping at all. They don't care. Basically you're on your own trying to find jobs. All you have to do is keep sending out resumes.

For young single mothers needing to support their children these are particularly acute difficulties:

I don't have any formal training past Year 12. I went straight out into the workforce so I don't have any of the computer skills which obviously I'm finding that I need to get any kind of a decent career going. I haven't got a career, I've got part-time jobs and this is going to be a problem for me until I do some training. Problems I've seen are basically walking into new jobs. I'm very quick at picking stuff up but people were taking advantage of me. Like there were jobs where I was getting paid \$6.50, \$7.50 an hour and I was so desperate that I just hung onto the job basically because I needed that money for my son. And since then I've basically been lucky because I am quick at picking up things. With my telecommunications job I had no formal training for that, a lot of that was tele-marketing and I've never really done that before. But after the first day's work, you know, they saw I was really good and so they upped my pay and they saw that I was worthwhile and they kept me on for a while. And it was really sad when I had to leave that job basically [because the company went broke after 6 months]. So I'm hoping that these new jobs will go well but it's always a bit scary that its not going to last more than 2 weeks. (Tania, single mother, 3 year-old son)

What Tania wants is simply 'a full-time permanent position that is stable' and pays enough for her to buy a car again. She knows she needs further training.

In many of the casual and part-time jobs that the young women we interviewed had had, they had experienced discrimination of some kind, generally connected with their sex. At the age of 20 Julie had gone to Queensland to work as a strapper and then applied for bar

work with another girl. The employer 'took one look at her friend and said 'no, we don't want you', because '...it's a predominantly male town because a lot of guys come up from the properties. They wanted something that would bring the guys into the pub, and I lasted for 14 weeks, and then the guys started getting bored looking at me, so you lose the job, and when a new girl starts coming into town they still get away with it'.⁵

A number of the young mothers had experienced discrimination while pregnant or when they became parents. Andrea, who spent two years' training as a beauty consultant, had 'lots of problems getting a job because of [my daughter]'. She felt she did well at job interviews until they 'see playgroup on my resume'. Andrea was outraged that Trish lost her hairdressing apprenticeship when she became pregnant:

that's disgusting you have to work, you can't survive on a pension.
You need to support [your children]'.

Sarah had been working in a retail bakery on a casual basis when she got pregnant. She found her shifts 'cut down to one a week, and it was the Christmas period, the busiest period'. Her boss 'started saying things to me like, loosen your apron, when you start to show you're gonna have to leave'. Far from taking her dismissal lying down, Sarah was still in the process of using anti-discrimination legislation to get compensation. Tania had not experienced discrimination but was careful never to apply for jobs advertised as 'flexible'. Finding a full-time job with hours that were the same as the child care centre was 'a huge problem'. The exploitation that can accompany de-regulation of working hours was graphically described by her:

The first job I had last year was waitressing – he took advantage of me. I was desperate for extra money and I was basically working from 9 until 10 – just one hour. 10 and 12 he didn't need me because it wasn't that busy so I had to come back at 12 until 2. So I had one hour work, two hours when I couldn't do anything and then two more hours after that. So I only had three hours a day and I needed the money and like I've still got time with my son but for those two hours in between it wasn't worth going all the way home and coming back, so I'd just sit around in his café and read a book and drink a drink and if it got busy, it was like 'Oh, do you mind giving me a hand?' and of course, that was all for free.

Apart from the graduates, few of the women we interviewed had any experience of 'real jobs' although almost all had worked for many years, in a range of feminised occupations. Like the graduates, the women who left school early viewed these jobs as 'for the cash'. Julie had unsuccessfully tried to return to office work after working in other jobs for 2 years.

⁵ The stories we were told strongly support the argument developed by Lisa Adkins (1995) concerning the sexualisation of women's work in tourism and hospitality, and the link between this process and women's low pay and labour market segregation.

I tried, and there was just nothing. I did the traineeship when I was 18, then I got to 21 on full wages and they don't want to pay that...

Employment plans for the future

Many of the graduates aspired to management roles in the future and they spoke about these possibilities in terms of their personal attributes. Rebecca thought 'I might eventually fall into something like that. In school I fell into leadership positions', and Anne said 'I just know my personality is leadership'. Other factors they saw as important were the working environment, with Kate noting 'we all thrive on pace'. Most found their ideas about having children did not fit easily with their ambitions for work, although Serena accepted that when she had a child her priorities might change: 'I'll know then how much time I want to be at work and how much time I want to be a mum'.

The university students were less clear when asked about their long-term employment ambitions, but Tina spoke of wanting 'in the end to do something really good', to have 'authority' and 'a manager role'; Martina of being 'on the cutting edge', 'in the loop'; Simone definitely wants 'to get somewhere' which 'for me would definitely mean moving up', while Susan spoke of hoping to have 'a job I can be pretty proud of'. Like the graduates these women were very unclear about how they might combine having children with their careers. Tina's dilemma was that:

I know I want to have children but I want to go back to work, but at the same time I want to be there for my children when they grow up.

The young single mothers who were working towards gaining qualifications were also focussed on their careers although they were very much starting out on these. Judy wanted to be working full-time as a teacher overseas and 'if someone comes along' to have gotten married and had more children.

In general the ambitions of the mothers living with partners were more directly concerned with their families and children, although Sarah wanted to 'be an accountant, have a good job, and have a licence'.

With a very recent baby Julie thought:

Its hard to say what you're going to be doing in ten years because you don't know how your kids are going to react to things that you do. So what you do hinges on how your kids are coping and what they're going through, and you can't say right now what they're going to be like in 10 years' time, so it's very hard to say what you're going to do (Julie, living with partner, 2 month-old baby)

Conclusions and policy implications

Parenting is an issue for all women, not just young mothers. The polarisation of work and parenting experiences along class and education lines is producing contradictory consequences for women at both ends of the spectrum.

Young mothers are often viewed simply as victims and yet becoming a mother had been the most positive event in the lives of many of the young women in this study. At the same time mothering is not regarded by them as a substitute for commitment to careers and in fact, being a mother has provided many women with a greater sense of purpose in their lives and a strong desire to be providers for their children. They are aware of the realities facing them. However, many struggle to build secure futures and to meet their families' current needs with very little support. Along with other early school leavers young mothers are often seen as 'at risk' because of their exit from the education and training system at a young age. And yet when they do wish to return to training the opportunities are limited and there are few supports.

At the other end of the spectrum young women in professional occupations are strongly committed to their careers and gain enormous satisfaction from their work. The women in this study had worked hard, and were confident they would realise their ambitions for highly successful careers in their chosen fields. They plan to defer motherhood for their careers and they believe they must make a choice between the two at some point later in life.

It is not surprising that these particular women hold very conventional views of motherhood. The framework for public debate about work and mothering has focussed on 'making choices' and within this, conventional definitions of motherhood have remained relatively unchallenged. Consequently young career women must, if they are to be mothers at some stage in the future, make a choice at that time to 'be there' for their children. For young women with fewer labour market credentials the framework is also inadequate and the 'choice' in favour of motherhood is not a real choice; it is deeply shaped by class and socio-economic status.

Teenage parenting and disadvantage

For women who have children at a very young age there can be risks of longer-term economic disadvantage but the experiences and decisions of teenagers who become pregnant at school and keep their babies need to be seen in a broader context.

Australian studies of working class girls have pointed to a number of conflicts experienced by teenage girls resulting from the contradictory messages they receive in relation to their futures about paid work and domesticity, and relating to both their sexuality and maturity. For example, on the one hand overt expressions of sexuality challenge norms for those who rebel at school, while on the other sexuality and sexual relationships are usually seen by teenage girls in terms of motherhood and marriage (Gilbert & Taylor 1991). Young women can experience a conflict between 'their preoccupation with issues related to femininity and their awareness of educational concerns' (1991 p. 17). For young women negotiating these conflicts, issues such as contraception, pregnancy and abortion can be particularly difficult. We must be able to provide them with a range of alternative pathways rather than simply trying to prevent

young women having babies very young. There are dangers in focussing on the future for these young women rather than on their present needs.

Supportive school environments and a curriculum that is responsive to young women's needs are vital and, for many girls from lower socio-economic status families, schools do not appear to be providing these. Wyn and Holden have noted that for young women who are already marginalised 'the failure [of schools] to acknowledge the realities of adult women's lives, and the distinct perspective of women, has the effect of further marginalising them' (1994 p. 41).

Once out of school there is a very narrow range of appropriate training alternatives for young women and particularly young mothers who leave school early. Access to courses are currently made very difficult by lack of support service such as child care. Recent changes in government policy have actually restricted access to programs. In the past DEETYA provided funds allowing young women in the JET program to access pre-vocational courses which have been of great appeal to young mothers. Now most JET participants are only able to access these courses on a user-pays basis with costs 'that would be prohibitive to sole parents on income support' (DSS et al. 1997, p. ix). It must also be recognised that the success of such training programs ultimately depends on the existence of enough jobs for the participants. Unemployment levels in Australia throughout the 1990s have been a major barrier.

Wyn and Holden have also questioned the appropriateness of the concepts of pathways and outcomes for young women as they are currently defined. While discourses about pathways are silent 'on the aspects of young people's lives that are deemed to be private, including sexuality...' the successful transition to independence for young women is about more than education, training and jobs. It 'involves the negotiation of complexities of adult life that blurs the lines between public and private' (1994 p. 39).

We will not be able to secure better futures for young women without recognising the reality of their lives and responding to their needs as mothers and workers in constructive ways rather than seeing their decisions and lives as the problem.

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