

Single Mothers

Other Names: • Unmarried Mothers

Details

Single mothers (also referred to as unmarried mothers) historically often struggled to support their babies and to deal with the social stigma attached to their situation. These women (and their children who were born 'out of wedlock') were the targets of various charitable endeavours in Australia from the earliest days of white settlement. Until perhaps the 1970s, to be a single mother carried significant stigma and the approach taken by institutions was usually to hide the 'unfortunate' woman away from society, in institutions such as maternity homes, rescue homes and lying-in hospitals. Single pregnant women were generally regarded as a disgrace, and institutions often took a punitive approach to their 'care'. From about the 1940s to the late 1970s, many of these mothers experienced enormous pressure to consent to have their child adopted, which was seen to be a fresh start for both mother and baby.

Single pregnant women came to institutions for the period of 'confinement' and their babies were usually born at a nearby hospital. Many single mothers were separated from their children after their stay in a maternity home and hospital, and their children were adopted. Others found it impossible to care for their children and earn a living, with the result that children ended up in some form of out-of-home 'care'.

If a young woman who was a ward of the state in a children's institution became pregnant, she was likely to be transferred into a maternity home, usually one of the same denomination.

State and territory child welfare legislation could be used to remove babies from single mothers. For example, in New South Wales, the *Child Welfare Act* 1939 expanded the definition of a ward of state to include children resident in a hostel for expectant or nursing mothers, meaning single mothers could lose their rights to make decisions. It enabled the NSW Minister of the Child Welfare Department to order a child's adoption.

With the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972, and following the efforts of feminist activists, single mothers were finally entitled to receive the 'Supporting Mothers' Benefit' on the same basis as all other unsupported mothers (such as widows). This shift reflected a more accepting attitude from Australian society to single mothers. From the early 1970s, less children were available for adoption, and charitable services for single mothers and their children shifted away from maternity homes.

Legislation in states and territories from the 1970s made children of single mothers equal before the law. Historically, these children were often termed "illegitimate". For example, the *Status of Children Act* 1974 in Tasmania was An Act to remove the legal disabilities of children born out of wedlock, and to establish parenthood of certain children.

In 2011-2012, as a result of the efforts over many years of many mothers who were separated from their children by adoption, the Senate held an inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices. On 21 March 2013, the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard apologised on behalf of the Australian Government to people affected by forced adoption or removal policies and practices.

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Related Entries

Related Events

- [Apology for the Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers, Parliament of Western Australia \(19 October 2010\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)
- [Parliamentary Apology for Past Adoption Practices, Parliament of Victoria \(25 October 2012\)](#)

Related Glossary Terms

- [Forced Adoption \(c. 1940 - c. 1970\)](#)
- [Supporting Mother's Benefit \(1973 - current\)](#)

Related Archival Series

- [Affiliation Files \[Maintenance Branch, Department of Community Services\] \(c. 1963 - 1975\)](#)

Related Archival Items

- [Interview with Beryl Grant, Matron of Ngala, 1959-1980](#)

Related Legislation

- [Births, deaths and marriages registration 1841 \(1841 - current\)](#)
- [Status of Children Act 1974, Tasmania \(1974 - current\)](#)

Related Concepts

- [Adoption in Tasmania \(c. 1920 - current\)](#)
The babies of single mothers were often adopted.

Resources

- Hamilton, Madeleine, [Shocking scenes from a teen pregnancy](#), Eureka Street, 15 December 2011
- Harris, Helen D, [Victoria Police Involvement in the Infant Life Protection Act 1893-1908](#), Provenance, 2010
- [Interview with Beryl Grant, Matron of Ngala 1959-1980, by Helene Charlesworth](#), May 1997
- [National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Experiences](#), Australian Institute of Family Studies, No date
- [Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers - Apology \[Hansard p7881a-7889a\]](#), parliament.wa.gov.au, 19 October 2010

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