



Council of
Single Mothers
and their **Children**

Bloom: Careers, work & wellbeing for single mothers

Evaluation Report

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Prepared for Council of Single Mothers and their Children
by:

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CSMC thanks Erika Williams, the facilitator who developed the Bloom Program and supportive relationships with relevant services. The comments from participants make clear how much they valued her very expertise.

Executive Summary

In 2023 Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) launched the Bloom program designed to support the wellbeing and aspirations of single mothers. Guided by a professional facilitator who has been a single mother herself, Bloom used a place-based approach to support single mothers to connect with local peer networks and services, and through one-to-one tailored sessions, helped identify and action suitable pathways towards their aspirations and family wellbeing.

There were eight Bloom programs delivered in Victoria: Shepparton, Ballarat, Wodonga, Northern Metro 1, Northern Metro 2, Bendigo and Geelong. An online stream of individual sessions was not place-based and has not been included in the evaluation.

This impact evaluation has sought to understand what outcomes were achieved and contributions Bloom has made to change and impact in participants' lives.

The evaluation comprised three methods to answer the research questions and to triangulate findings. First was analysis of participant surveys over three intervals: before Bloom commenced, immediately after Bloom finished, and six months after Bloom finished. Second was extended interviews with the Bloom facilitator and observations of one-on-one sessions. The third stage was conduct and analysis of semi-structured participant case study interviews.

From the evaluation, there were four main changes reported by participants as a result of undertaking Bloom.

- First, Bloom supported steps towards education, training and employment.
- Second, Bloom provided personal support including in relation to parenting.
- Third, Bloom supported confidence and emotional wellbeing, and,
- Fourth, Bloom fostered social and community connectedness.

From responses to the evaluation, participants found Bloom helped them overcome specific obstacles through practical, tailored, strengths-based support. These changes become more fully visible when examining how women narrated for themselves the impact Bloom had in the context of their lives via the case study interviews.

There is also evidence that changes in participants' lives continued at least until six months after Bloom had finished. There are four main themes reported by participants in the six month post program survey.

- First, was the continued progress in education, training and employment goals.
- Second, an ongoing shift in mindset and confidence.
- Third, an improvement to personal and family relations, and
- Fourth, the development of a general self-understanding and acceptance.

In thinking about the broader impact of Bloom, it is important to reflect on ongoing difficulties faced by participants during and after Bloom. These including continuing financial hardship and the difficulties inherent in being a single mother and thereby, the only adult undertaking all the work of raising a family that society presumes will involve two adults. This suggests that individual support such as that offered through Bloom can only go so far when single mothers are faced with significant barriers that can be change only through structural and policy reform. This is particularly true given participants are living within a society and economy that devalues and undermines unpaid care work and generates or enables violence against them.

Nonetheless, the overall impacts of the program are meaningful and include:

- 1) Delivering significant support to developing career and study goals,

- 2) Providing emotional support through a single mother lens, and
- 3) Helping single mothers gain confidence and self-advocacy skills.

Bloom made women aware of services to support them in the community, gave women someone to talk with who understood their lives, built confidence, provided real material support, and worked through strategies for dealing with ex-partners or other relationships. This was in addition to practical steps to work towards career and study aspirations. This impact came from a program that embraced single mothers holistically, met them where they were at, and worked with them one-on-one, without judgement.

The Bloom program has implications for policy.

1. Programs targeting single mothers need to be designed and run by single mothers.
2. Programs for single mothers need to move away from focusing just on employment, training and education.
3. There is a need to move away from the deficit and punitive 'Mutual Obligations' frame in government employment services, and particularly for single mothers with children. Bloom is an alternative to the model currently underpinning Workforce Australia.
4. A skilled facilitator/social worker with lived experience as a single mother is critical to run successful programs.

Introduction

In 2020, Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) launched a pilot program designed to support the wellbeing and aspirations of single mothers. The program was later called Bloom when CSMC received funding for 2023-2025 from the William Buckland Foundation.

Bloom aimed to:

- Improve self-esteem and increase mother's ability to advocate for themselves and their children
- Improve financial security
- Reduce reliance on the social security net
- Improve the wellbeing of women and their children and facilitate a brighter future
- Create better understanding of the specific needs of single mother service users among generalist employment programs and further education providers.

Guided by a professional facilitator who has been a single mother herself, Bloom used a place-based approach to support single mothers to connect with local peer networks and services, and identify and action suitable careers, training and employment programs. This strengths-based program aimed to provide individualised online support for single mothers to develop and/or revive career or employment aspirations, vocational training options and work-readiness resilience. Ultimately, Bloom aimed to increase participants' financial capacity to support themselves and their families.

Bloom participants were guided by confidential online consultations with the Bloom Facilitator to work on actions towards specific personal and career aspirations. Bloom also brought women together in their local area to help build peer connections, enhance confidence and engage with local services to help with the ongoing sustainability of the outcomes after the local program formally concluded. The program was designed with a work/life and wellbeing focus to holistically align each single mother's employment and study capability with the myriad of other priorities women face.

For each participant the Bloom program included:

- One-on-one online careers and employment guidance sessions over the duration of the program
- An in-person group session with guest speakers to encourage connection, self-advocacy and reflection in each location
- Emails, texts and phone calls to participants provided throughout to provide supports and referrals where required
- An online presentation with the financial counsellor for some participants
- Offer of membership and access to support from Council for Single Mothers and their Children.

In addition to the place-based stream as outlined above, Bloom also offered an individual session stream for single mothers who were outside the selected Bloom regions.

Individual one-on-one sessions were offered online to mothers engaging with the Council of Single Mothers and their Children Support Line, or through women contacting CSMC interested in Bloom but outside the regions.

For these sessions, the Bloom placed-based program methodology was adapted to individual sessions:

- The Facilitator liaised with each woman or referrer and then constructed a safe space for an initial online session, where pre-existing barriers, fears or aspirations were identified.
- An individualised plan with tailored goals and referrals was then established to address each participant's barriers, increase work readiness and explore vocational or work pathways.

This one-on-one tailored process was often contained within a single session, with follow up emails.

A participation fund of up to \$400 per person enabled the purchase of equipment (e.g. refurbished laptop, Wi-Fi), completion of vocational training, or other such need if external funding was not available through Workforce Australia or similar programs.

Bloom Theory of Change

The theory of change underpinning Bloom contended that:

- **If we** provide individual holistic support for single mothers to develop personalised pathways to employment, identify support for their barriers to paid work, and build peer supports and local engagement through place-based groups
- **We will** raise participating single mothers' self-esteem, address employment barriers, and increase employability potential
- **So that** single mothers can secure employment that complements their family responsibilities and aligns with their interests
- **Leading to** greater wellbeing, health and financial security for single mothers and their children, now and in the future.

Evaluation design and methods

Council of Single Mothers and their Children received funding from the William Buckland Foundation to run Bloom over the 2023-2025 period. These Bloom programs included:

1. Shepparton (6 women), July 10 - August 31, 2023
2. Ballarat (3 women), October 16 - December 11, 2023
3. Wodonga (10 women), February 6 - April 8 2024
4. Northern metro 1 (7 women), May 13 - July 1 2024
5. Northern metro 2 (9 women), July 22 - September 9 2024
6. Bendigo (3 women), Feb 20 - April 16 2025
7. Geelong (5 women), Oct 17 to December 9 2025
8. Online individual sessions (28 women) May 2023 - April 2025

There was diversity among the 72 single mothers who participated in Bloom.

- Participant ages ranged from 18-63 and included people not born in Australia as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous single mothers born in Australia.
- Women's sources of income were diverse and included part-time and casual employment, as well as social security payments.
- Women also came to Bloom with broad educational backgrounds – many with university degrees, diplomas and certificates. Table 1 shows the demographic backgrounds of participants in each program.

These mothers were raising a total of 409 children, who are indirect beneficiaries from the increased self esteem, community connection and plans for financial security among Bloom participants.

Table 1: Bloom Participant Demographics

	Shepparton	Ballarat	Wodonga	Individual	Metro 1	Metro 2	Bendigo	Geelong	Total
Number of participants	6	3	10	29	7	9	3	5	72
Average Age	40.5 (Range 34-54 years)	38 (Range 30-46)	34 (Range 25-49)	Data n/a (Range 18-64)	Data n/a	40 (Range 31-45)	44 (Range 31-63)	43 (Range 35-56)	Data n/a (Range 18-63)
Background									
Non-Indigenous Australian born	4	1	8	9	(DNA)	7	2	4	35
First Nations	1	0	1	1	(DNA)	0	0	0	3
Non-Australian born	1	1	1	19	(DNA)	2	1	3	26
Number of dependent children	Average: 2 (Range 1-3)	Average: 2 (Range 1-3)	Average: 2 (Range 1-3 kids)	Average 2 (Range 1-4 kids)	(DNA)	Average 2 (Range 1-3 kids)	Average 2 (Range 1-3)	Average 3 (Range 1-6 kids)	(Range 1-6)
Source of Income									
Employed (Part-time or casual)	2	1	2	4	(DNA)	2	0	1	12
Parenting Payment	3	1	7	20	(DNA)	7	2	3	43
Other social security payment	1	1	1	5	(DNA)	2	3	6	19
Highest Level of Study									
Certificate	1	1	6	3	(DNA)	4	1	4	20
Diploma	1	0	0	7	(DNA)	4	0	4	16
Year 10	2	0	0	0	(DNA)	0	1	0	3
Year 11/12	1	1	0	6	(DNA)	3	0	3	14
University degree	0	2	0	12	(DNA)	5	1	5	25

Table 1 shows the demographic data supplied by Bloom participants before they commenced Bloom (Metro 1 demographics not provided). Some participants received more than one type of income – e.g. two different types of social security payments and/or had paid work.

In the pre-program survey, we asked participants why they signed up for Bloom. Figure 1 shows the reasons women gave. Most prominent in the responses included, 'gaining confidence', 'having specific help for single mothers' and 'talking with a single mum professional'. 'Networking' and 'career advice' were written in next to 'other' by two individual participants.

Figure 1: Participant reasons for coming to Bloom

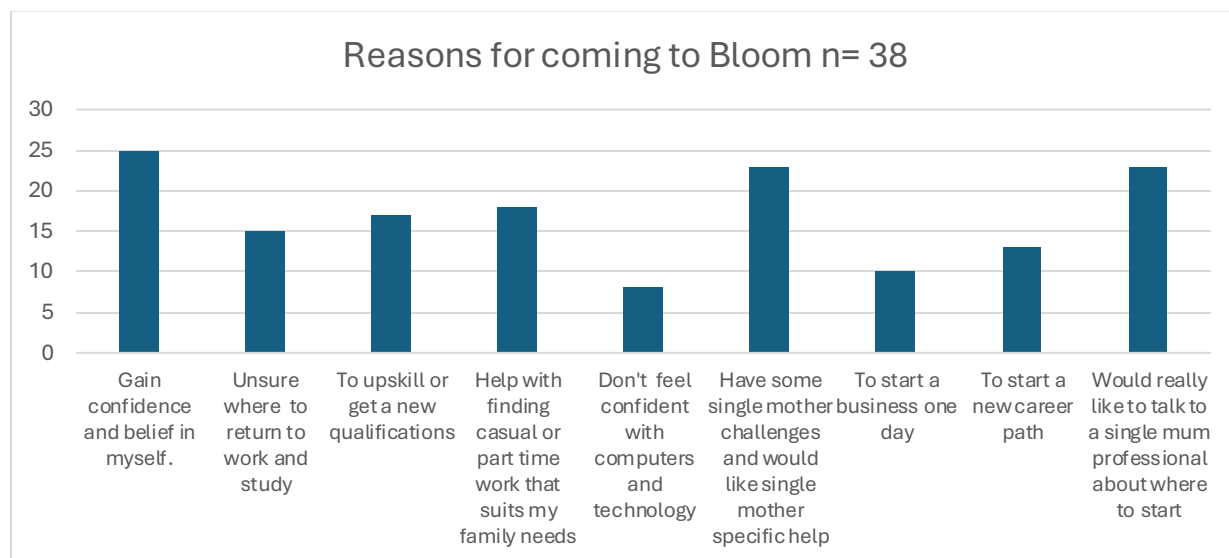


Figure 1: shows the reasons why women decided to enrol in Bloom (Geelong, Metro 2, Ballarat, Wodonga, Bendigo, Shepparton (n=38)).

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation sought to analyse not only if Bloom achieved its stated goals in the William Buckland application, but also to analyse broader intended and unintended consequences of the program to facilitate further learning.

Evaluation Research Questions

The evaluation comprised of nine overall research questions to understand not only the outcomes articulated in the William Buckland Foundation grant, but also the broader intended and unintended consequences of Bloom.

1. What are the outcomes from Bloom (William Buckland Foundation outcomes)?
2. What changes did Bloom contribute to in participants' lives?
3. How are the changes from Bloom sustained over time by participants?
4. Are there aspects of Bloom that can be replicated and scaled up?
5. What is the overall impact of the program?
6. Do these impacts match the needs of the target population?
7. What operational and implementation challenges does Bloom face?
8. Do the findings from the evaluation support the Bloom theory of change? If not, what would be a more appropriate theory of change?
9. What are the policy implications coming from this evaluation?

Evaluation Analysis Methods

This evaluation comprised of three methods to answer the research questions, as well as to triangulate findings.

1. Analysis of baseline and post surveys of participants:

Survey data from participants was taken at three intervals: before Bloom commenced, after Bloom finished, and six months after Bloom finished. This data was then analysed to develop an overarching understanding of the challenges participants faced before entering Bloom and how these changed over time, as well as their expectations and aspirations for the program and how/if these translated into real outcomes for participants.

Specifically, through analysing the pre and post responses, the evaluation was able to build an understanding of the various reported changes to participant's' lives during Bloom. A survey with similar questions to the exit survey was also sent at six months after the program finished for all participants to complete. This 6-month survey helped the evaluation understand the sustainability of impacts overtime – how the learnings and changes participants might have experienced during Bloom have been sustained or not in the time since the program finished.

2. Extended interviews with Bloom Facilitator and observations of one-on-one sessions:

These interviews and observations provided a greater understanding of the skills, techniques and design of the Bloom Program. The ongoing discussions with the Bloom Facilitator also helped to understand any changes in the program design that were occurring, as well as challenges in the roll out of the program. Interviews with other CSMC colleagues also informed broader understandings of the organisational context of the program.

3. Participant case studies:

Case study interviews with one or two women per program were undertaken to allow participants to narrate their own experiences of Bloom. These interviews illuminated the depth of the impacts and changes Bloom has on participants' lives, as well as an understanding of the context from which participants entered Bloom, the challenges they faced, and what Bloom did or didn't do for them. Consequently, the case studies added depth and context to the survey data, as well as highlighting the strengths and opportunities for the program to develop further.

Evaluation Results

The results directly answered each of the nine research questions set at the beginning of the evaluation. Each question is analysed below.

1. What are the outcomes from Bloom?

There were seven specific program outcomes Bloom had as targets in the William Buckland Foundation funding agreement, and Bloom exceeded almost all. The individual stream was not included in the agreed analysis of the achievement of the targets. In the table below, the reported achievements against these targets are outlined.

Table 2: William Buckland Foundation Outcomes

Key: **Exceeded target** **Met target** **Target not met**

	Shep	Ballarat	Wodonga	Metro 1	Metro 2	Geelong	Bendigo
Developed a workplan (target 80%)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Engaged with supports to address personal challenges and increase capacity to identify structural barriers (target 70%)	100%	100%	100%	71%	83%	100%	100%
Measured an increase in their confidence to self-advocate, secure employment and improve their family's financial wellbeing (target 70%) (after 6 months measure was maintaining levels and/or increasing confidence)	89% increase at end of course; 67% after 6 months	44% increase at end of course; 81% after 6 months	44% increase at end of course; 60% after 6 months	2% increase at end of course; 47% after 6 months	58% increase at end of course; 76% after 6 months	63% increase at end of course; 75% after 6 months	75% increase at end of course.
Entered work readiness programs, vocational training, further education or secure (includes women on a waiting list) (target 50%)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Engaged in work readiness programs, vocational training, further education or secure employment (target 50%)	100% after, and 100% after 6 months	100%	90%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2 shows the progress made on reported outcomes for Bloom so far. In the exit survey right after Bloom, confidence was measured in relation to an increase from what participants said when they started Bloom. In the survey six months after Bloom, participants confidence had either increased or was the same as when they finished Bloom. This is why the results in the 6 months data seems higher than the exit data.

Table 2 shows the measured outcomes for the data available. There is significant progress being made in all the outcomes except confidence – including very high rates of achievement in terms of developing activity plans, and securing employment, training and education placements.

Confidence levels are mixed, but we can see that these levels are largely maintained during the program for participants, and many reported increases in various aspects of confidence. The discussion at Question 2 expands on the analysis of participant confidence.

The question on confidence itself would be better framed through the lens of confidence to access services and supports (and other areas inside participant’s control) rather than asking confidence in being able to *individually* improve participant financial security and wellbeing. This is because the data suggests that confidence is not the ‘problem’ for women in the Bloom cohort – rather the main issues women are facing are structural issues that women are continually confronted with and issues outside their control (e.g. poverty, policy not inclusive of single parents, consequences of family violence emotional trauma, etc.). Therefore, asking if confidence has improved, limits analysis to the complexity facing women’s lives and possibility distorts confidence measures. This discussion is further expanded in Question 2, below.

2. What changes did Bloom contribute to in participants’ lives?

The analysis of reported changes from Bloom draws on three specific areas of the evaluation: open-ended questions from participants in the exit survey, perceived confidence levels in the exit survey, and case study discussions with participants.

In the exit survey, participants were asked, in an opened ended question, what were the main changes in their lives that Bloom contributed to. Responses can be categorised into 4 main areas:

- 1) Supporting education, training and employment
- 2) Providing personal and family support
- 3) Supporting confidence and emotional wellbeing
- 4) Fostering social and community connectedness.

Supporting education, training and employment

- *“Redirected me to complete my course, with the assistance to get approval from the university for a part time placement”*
- *“Help with finding a new career path and helping access resources to accomplish it”*
- *“I feel empowered to seek help that I need, I feel ready to study for a career”*
- *“I have a solid list of tasks, a roadmap towards my goals and having ticked many of these tasks off already, I feel like it’s all possible”.*

Providing personal and family support

- *“The vision is way clearer. It’s just helped me to go more gently on myself. To know it’s ok to feel that it’s hard and to seek help”*
- *“Confidence Time management Family building Prioritising specific needs for me and my children”*
- *“To take better care of me, setting and holding boundaries”.*
- *“Seek mediation with my ex-partner”.*

Supporting confidence and emotional wellbeing

- *“Confidence to pursue things I would of thought were out of my league”*
- *“Confidence in returning to work”*

- *“Has helped me to wipe away my fear from being scared to connect with other people and to feel that I do have a voice and helped me to have the confidence in being able to speak up when it's needed the most”*
- *“[The Bloom Faciliator] Erika has been such a great support. She has helped me identify my value and helped me gain confidence in my abilities. The compassion and support I received was amazing. Erika has given me hope and ignited my excitement for the future”.*
- *“Keep hope in every circumstances. And try out every way that makes your day/life better”.*

Fostering social and community connectedness

- *“Creating opportunities for myself that I didn’t before”*
- *“The main thing so far that has changed for me is knowing I'm not alone. That it's ok to ask and need help. I've really struggled with coming to terms with everything I've been through and am still going through. Trying to find your feet after life collapses around you, especially if you have no supports around you, as I do, seems almost impossible at times”.*

We also examined changes in perceived confidence between when the participant first entered Bloom, to when they finished Bloom (and 6 months after where data was available – see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Perceived increase in confidence levels of Bloom participants

Table 3 (below) shows changes in perceived confidence levels of Bloom participants. Not all participants responded to the exit survey, but the evaluation was able to track movements in perceived confidence levels for each of the women who responded over the course of Bloom.

The most significant variation occurred between different Bloom programs - Metro 1 program showed the smallest increase in perceived confidence, and Shepparton and Bendigo reported large increases. It is worth noting that all the women from Metro 1 were referred through a Family Violence service and were struggling with the consequences of family violence. It is quite probable that this had an impact on their confidence measures.

When women did not report an increase, they generally reported the same confidence level they had when starting Bloom – meaning a zero score indicates their confidence was maintained through Bloom.

	Shep (n=4)	Ballarat (n=3)	Wodonga (n=8)	Metro 1 (n=6)	Metro 2 (n=2)	Geelong (n=2)	Bendigo (n=2)	Average overall
1. I feel confident about my employment potential.	75%	0%	63%	0%	60%	33%	100%	47%
2. I feel confident advocating for myself in relation to my career, employment or training.	100%	33%	50%	17%	100%	67%	50%	60%
3. I feel confident accessing employment and training support services in my local area.	100%	67%	50%	0%	100%	67%	100%	69%
4. I feel confident using online employment, education and training platforms.	75%	33%	50%	0%	40%	33%	50%	40%
5. I feel suitable work opportunities and/or my career pathway is currently within my reach.	75%	67%	63%	0%	80%	100%	100%	69%
6. I feel able to manage work along with being a single parent.	75%	67%	63%	0%	40%	67%	100%	59%
7. I feel confident writing current resume and job application documents on my own.	100%	33%	63%	0%	40%	100%	100%	62%
8. I feel confident about improving my family's current financial security.	100%	100%	0%	0%	60%	33%	50%	49%
9. I feel confident about creating financial security for my future.	100%	0%	13%	0%	40%	33%	50%	34%
Average	89%	44%	44%	2%	58%	63%	75%	54%

Also evident in Table 3 above, there is diversity in confidence levels in differing aspects of life that participants were asked about. “I feel confident advocating for myself in relation to my career, employment or training”, “I feel confident accessing employment and training support services in my local area”, and “I feel confident writing current resume and job application documents on my own”, were where an increase in confidence was most reported. This is an important point to note as these aspects all speak to areas of women’s lives that they have more control over.

Most telling are the other areas where women felt the least increase in confidence. For example, “I feel confident about creating financial security for my future” had the least increase in confidence overall. This is an area where women have least control and are at the whim of policy and structural factors.

Combining both the findings on change in confidence levels and women’s responses to the open questions to what change Bloom had on their lives suggests a need to mitigate questions on ‘increase confidence’ in future research. Whilst women did note that increasing confidence was an important reason for coming to Bloom, there is a need to specify which areas of confidence in women’s lives matter. For example, increasing confidence in applying for jobs differs from confidence in providing financial security for children, in that the former is largely controlled by the individual, and the latter controlled largely by structural and policy forces. Therefore, it doesn’t matter how confident women feel if the policy settings are constructed in a way that work against women and their children’s financial security.

Women, in their pre-survey responses noted also that they needed practical support overcoming challenges facing them – not just confidence. This suggests that we need to think about change not just in the context of diverse types of confidence, but also in the overall focus on confidence against other outcomes of Bloom. We also see in participants’ general responses about what they got from the program that they found Bloom very helpful not just for emotional support, but also for overcoming specific obstacles through practical support. We can see this insight more fully when examining how women narrated Bloom changes in the context of their lives in the case study interviews. Below is an analysis of change drawing on case study interviews to help understand ‘change’ in the context of women’s lives.

Case Study Interviews: Exploring the context in which Bloom participants reported changes

Women’s lives are complex, and programs targeting single mothers need to work within this context of complexity. There are many reasons why women might find themselves unemployed or under-employed – and these reasons are often disconnected from general policy narratives that too often see unemployment as emblematic of a deficit in the individual. The three case studies (below) are from participants who took part in Bloom discussing the various challenges in their lives, and how Bloom engaged and supported them within this context of complexity. Case study names have been changed.

Case Study 1: “Abby”

Abby is a 30-year-old single mum of one 7-year-old daughter. As it has just been the two of them, Abby had done everything to support her daughter. She worked several jobs to keep money coming in, even taking her daughter to her evening shift at the gym. Abby didn’t want to keep this up for her daughter, so she brainstormed ideas – and decided to start a baking business. This micro- business meant her hours were more flexible and fitted better with looking after her daughter. She also receives Parenting Payment Single from the government to supplement her income. Abby has worked hard to build her business – she was not even a baker before – and she has been able to grow her business bit by bit over the years. Her long-term aspiration is to continue to grow her baking business.

Abby got involved in Bloom through her Job Service Provider who said she had to do an activity for mutual obligations to continue getting her Parenting Payment. She didn't want to do a tick the box activity and so the provider suggested Bloom. Abby really loved the sessions with the Faciliator, particularly because the Faciliator was able to help her clearly identify what she needed in her life. She had already accomplished so much, but Abby struggled with anxiety and an eating disorder. She had tried to get help previously, but no services were either affordable or attentive to her needs.

"[Bloom] put me onto so many positive things that I had no idea about that I would never ask for in my life"

The Faciliator was immediately able to get a referral for Abby to start working on her health issues and this has "meant heaps" to Abby who has had to put herself "on the backburner" for years whilst she focused on raising her daughter and keeping income coming in.

"For me being alone, I've just pushed myself aside for a decade, just becoming a mum, and I've just hit rock bottom, and I just haven't received the help until Bloom just stepped in and really pointed me in the right direction and showed me where to get the right help and what to try and recommendations and that. So, it is been really good for me, but also for my business".

The Faciliator was also able to arrange for her to be set up with a laptop and NBN to help with the business which Abby will continue to pursue.

Abby's story provides insight that even when single mothers are in paid employment, it does not always ensure they have economic security. It also shows that while confidence helps, structural factors such as system demands working against single mums are the bigger issue. Abby's experience demonstrates how Bloom understood these challenges and provided practical steps and services to help Abby in her aspirations. These steps were rounded and not just 'employment' focused – and they supported her holistically. Abby's experience also helps to understand how current employment services can be a poor fit for single mothers' needs. Abby was already running a business but was still subjected to mutual obligations which assumes people must be compelled to work. Employment services need not be punitive and must meet women where they are at – something that Bloom did well.

Case Study 2: "Cody"

Cody is extremely busy. She is a mum of 6 kids – 15, 13, 11, 3, and infant twins. All six children have various needs with their care – the twins were born prematurely and need specialised care to help with their development, and the older children have trauma-related disorders linked to abuse they witnessed from Cody's ex-partner.

Cody loves being a mum and adores her children. The day to day is very chaotic. She has many balls up in the air at any one time. She manages the chaos but has little time for herself. In the spare time she has for herself, Cody has enrolled in a Certificate 4 course in accounting and bookkeeping. Because of her huge unpaid care load, Cody has been unable to find paid work that is flexible enough to work around her care responsibilities. The Certificate 4 course is online, allowing her to study from home. When she is finished with the Certificate 4, she will be able to work from home with flexible hours enabling her to meet her children's appointments and care needs.

Cody heard about Bloom via the Council of Single Mothers and their Children and decided she would engage to see if it could help her make the chaos a little more manageable. She found that Bloom was helpful in having someone "outside the box to bounce strategies and ideas with. Someone to make sense of the chaos". Cody and the Faciliator used most of the sessions to workshop practical

solutions to issues coming up in the day to day. With everything so chaotic for Cody, these sessions helped her make sense of her life and aspirations, providing an external perspective from someone who understands being a single mother and did not sit in judgement on her.

In the Bloom sessions, the Faciliator and Cody worked on making time for Cody and prioritising her needs. Cody and her older three children had fled domestic violence and the Faciliator helped Cody see how the trauma in her kids was being experienced in different way from her own. Bloom linked Cody in with Carer Gateway for extra support, got a monitor for her computer and a desk planner. The Faciliator also got a clock for Cody they identified that with time so tight, she doesn't have time to find her phone and check the time. All these items helped bring some organisation back, alleviate chaos, and helped Cody get a "clearer head".

Cody's case study helps to understand the sometimes chaotic and expansive load that unpaid care can bring to single mothers' lives. It also shows how a single focus on paid work, training and education is very narrow given all the challenges that Cody is dealing with. An holistic approach was needed in working with Cody through the day to day challenges with practical solutions, psychological and family support, as well as longer term aspirations. Cody's case study also underlines the critical role of the Faciliator in being able to workshop ideas with participants to find workable ways forward, and assisting with practical solutions to "bring order to the chaos."

Case Study 3: "Holly"

Holly is a single mum with two children with special needs in year 7 and year 9. One of the children has epilepsy. The break-up of her marriage was very difficult and even now she still has to deal with her ex and the emotional trauma that comes with that. Particularly difficult is that he doesn't help parent their two children and often compounds their difficulties. Holly must do it all herself.

Holly worked in disability care and was doing a Certificate 3 in Disability Care but had always wanted to work in a library. During Bloom, Holly realised she still wanted to get into library work – so she made a plan with The Faciliator and started working on a way to do exactly that. The Faciliator took the time to get to know Holly and what it was that mattered to her – work that excited her and that she really wanted to do. The Faciliator then helped her work on specific steps to make this happen – find a course she wanted to do, fix her CV and change from the Certificate 3 in Disability Care to a course in education support.

In addition to the practical steps, the Faciliator saw that for Holly, it wasn't just about training and work, but also about a lack of emotional support. Holly had a lot going on with her children and a controlling ex – and this took much of her energy and focus. The Faciliator helped Holly arrange family mediation to help her safely communicate with her former partner in relation to help she needs to care for the children. The Faciliator also connected Holly into support services to help her with her children.

Hollys' case study helps to understand how ex-partners continue to impact single mothers, including their ability to work and provide financial security. Holly's story, like Cody's, shows the complexity of unpaid care work single mothers undertake. This provides insights into the importance of aspirations and how much they matter for women, and that 'just any job' should not be considered by policy makers and service providers as 'being enough' for single mothers. Despite all that she is working with through the support of the Bloom Faciliator, Holly was able to step onto a pathway towards a career she had long wanted for herself.

Overall, the case studies reflect the complexity of women's lives and the myriad of factors that not only impact them in the here and now but have accumulated over time in their lives and may

continue into the future. This is an important insight to help those keen on developing programs suited for single mothers to understand that unemployment is:

- 1) not a behavioural deficiency and that punitive programs are not suited to their needs,
- 2) nor just about a shift in mindset and confidence.

Ultimately, programs focused primarily on employment may not be the best form of support for single mothers.

The three women in these case studies all had different needs when they came to Bloom, and a one size fits all approach would not have helped. Bloom was flexible and holistic, and tailored around what each woman needed. It wasn't always about employment and often the support needed was emotional and practical level support.

3. How are the changes from Bloom sustained over time by participants?

Six months after the Bloom program finished, we surveyed women to discover what changes they had maintained in their lives since Bloom.

There are four main themes that came from the responses from participants:

- 1) progress in education, training and employment goals,
- 2) shift in mindset and confidence,
- 3) personal and family relations,
- 4) self-understanding and acceptance.

It is important to note the decrease in the response rate of women engaging in the evaluation after six months; caution should be applied when thinking about the sustainability of change and the impact of Bloom in women's lives overtime.

Progress in education, training and employment goals

- "I'm enrolled in TAFE. I have computer skills and plans for my future"
- "Believing in myself. I have resumed my study all thanks to Erika's support and advice about how to go about this".
- "To start a career and find myself again, other than being "mum"."
- "I feel really grateful for the advice I received".
- "How to navigate my thoughts and create a clear map for the needs and available resources".
- "Without Bloom, I wouldn't know there are many services that can help you out and support you regardless of your situation and background, you won't have to put all this pressure on yourself. Especially when you have someone to talk to, so you won't feel alone and isolated".

Shift in mindset and confidence

- "I found my voice and confidence"
- "A total change in mindset! I had lost all confidence, but I now consider myself an actual asset to my employer and to my family".
- "To continue to give myself credit for even the smallest of accomplishments".
- "It gave me confidence and support at the most crucial time".
- "...has been an amazing source of support, offering kindness and encouragement that helped me navigate a difficult time in my life. She has empowered me to stand strong as a single mother and embrace new challenges. I have also completed two financial counselling

sessions to help me take on a new role within my household. Additionally, I've begun new training at work to upskill as a nurse practitioner..."

Personal and family relations

- "I can be happy working in a role which looks after my work life balance and cares for my headspace. Bloom has given me the confidence to identify & seek this regarding my career and also in parenting".

Self-understanding and acceptance

- "Understanding around the complexity of single mother circumstances"
- "Just that... I am worthy!! Erika's kindness is all I needed and yes, I still have my struggles juggling everyone at home, but the few hours I do at work daily are for me and I love it".
- "To just find out who I was and to not be afraid to reach out for support".
- "I feel heard and valued and will forever treasure that".
- "The positive and encouraging words that made me feel, "It's possible"."
- "To speak my truth. To hold my head up high. Not everyone is going to understand what single mum life is actually like unless they have experienced it themselves".

In the evaluation, we examined changes in confidence between when the participant first entered Bloom, to when they finished it (exit survey), and six months after the finish of Bloom.

Table 4 (below) shows the perceived change in confidence levels over time from Bloom participants. There was a much lower response rate for women engaging in the survey after six months. Nonetheless, the evaluation was able to track the responses in perceived confidence levels for each of the women who responded over time.

We see that women reported a maintenance in confidence in all areas 6 months after finishing Bloom. The highest rates were recorded in:

- "I feel confident advocating for myself in relation to my career, employment or training"
- "I feel confident accessing employment and training support services in my local area"
- "I feel confident using online employment, education and training platforms".

The lower rates maintained were:

- "I feel confident about creating financial security for my future"
- "I feel suitable work opportunities and/or my career pathway is currently within my reach"
- "I feel able to manage work along with being a single parent".

As with the exit survey, the areas that women felt least confident in are those that are often structural – linked to policy and broad economic and social challenges, and thus outside individual control.

Table 4: Confidence 6 months after the conclusion of Bloom

	Shep (n=3)	Ballarat (n=3)	Wodonga (n=3)	Metro 1 (n=3)	Metro 2 (n=3)	Geelong (n=2)	Overall average
1. I feel confident about my employment potential.	100%	na	33%	67%	100%	0%	60%
2. I feel confident advocating for myself in relation to my career, employment or training.	33%	100%	67%	67%	100%	100%	78%
3. I feel confident accessing employment and training support services in my local area.	67%	50%	67%	67%	67%	100%	70%
4. I feel confident using online employment, education and training platforms.	67%	100%	67%	33%	100%	100%	78%
5. I feel suitable work opportunities and/or my career pathway is currently within my reach.	67%	50%	67%	0%	67%	100%	58%
6. I feel able to manage work along with being a single parent.	67%	100%	33%	67%	33%	50%	58%
7. I feel confident writing current resume and job application documents on my own.	67%	100%	33%	67%	33%	100%	67%
8. I feel confident about improving my family's current financial security.	67%	67%	67%	33%	100%	50%	64%
9. I feel confident about creating financial security for my future.	67%	na	67%	33%	67%	50%	57%
Average	67%	81%	60%	47%	77%	75%	

In addition to the above, we asked women six months after program participation: “What if any challenges do you continue to face?” Women’s responses included both program specific suggestions and ongoing challenges faced due to issues beyond their control.

Program specific suggestions

- “More one on one support”
- “It just seemed quick, maybe more hands on with the resume/ job apps - however I was given the links”
- “More stories about the single women who have achieved something in life with all the odds”.

These suggestions provide important insights regarding the design of Bloom. Coupled with suggestions from the in-depth participant interviews, some women said that they wished Bloom

went for longer – perhaps providing an important suggestion in the design of programs similar to Bloom and working with single mothers, to do so over a longer period of time.

However, most of the responses from the six-month survey were open ended question that revealed structural circumstances outside the control of individual women and a program like Bloom. As one respondent put it, the ongoing challenges she faced were - “a lot”.

Specific structural challenges issues included

1. Financial hardship
2. Employment and study
3. Challenges of being a single mother.

Financial hardship included

- “Cost of living, education expenses”
- “Financial hardship”
- “Trying to figure out what I want to do with my life, without going into more financial debt”.

Employment and study

- “Finding work and hours that fit in with the shared care of my daughter”
- “Study to get high level qualifications”.

Single parenting

- “I’m in the early stages of being a single mother, and creating a parenting plan and financial settlement is still overwhelming, especially while dealing with a high-conflict ex”
- “Being default parent and figuring the balance of everything”
- “Navigating my ex husband and finding out he had an affair during and after my separation with another married woman”
- “That the systems don’t support emotional or the mental health of the primary carer”.

4. Are there aspects of Bloom that can be replicated and scaled up?

As a program, Bloom can be scaled up. However, the ability of Bloom critically relies on a strong team of facilitators who can connect and support women in a meaningful way. The professional skill and lived experience of the Bloom Facilitator was a major finding of the evaluation (see discussion in section 9).

Participants of Bloom commented on how important it was to have a facilitator who was a single mother and who understood intricately the issues facing single mothers. It was this experience as well as the Bloom Facilitator’s broad ranging and effective skills in finding practical, relevant and workable pathways forward for each individual participant which made a difference to participants. A scaling up of Bloom would require a well-designed training program for facilitators with relevant lived experience, e.g. single mothers, to develop and operationalise this capability with equal care, understanding and compassion.

Scaling up would also rely on the ability of the hosting agency to recruit participants. This was an ongoing challenge for Bloom throughout the program, particularly because the Council of Single Mothers and their Children and the program were operating in locations where neither the agency or the program had established contacts. A considerable amount of time was taken in introducing local services to Bloom and getting them to help with recruitment of participants.

5. What is the overall impact of the program?

In the 6-month post Bloom surveys, we asked women to reflect on the overall impact of Bloom on their lives. Whilst response rates were low, the women who did respond shared key insights into the enduring impact of program participation. There are three themes that emerged from these responses:

- 1) working towards career and study goals,
- 2) providing emotional support, and
- 3) gaining confidence and advocacy skills.

Working towards career and study goals

- “Bloom has encouraged me to look further into study options”
- “Helped me to work out potential job and education features”
- “Better knowledge about workplace options I can utilise, which enables me to no longer fear wasting my time training in a field I previously thought unsuitable”.

Emotional support

- “Emotional support and helping me with other family members”
- “Erika was so validating and supportive”
- “Helped me start counselling to create a better life for me and my daughter and to further grow my business”
- “I have never felt this amount of compassion since becoming a single mother”
- “Bloom has reignited a flame in me that I felt was slowly dying and given me confidence for my future knowing that I have the people around me that I can ask the questions that I need and I am forever grateful for attending this course and I would highly recommend it to anyone any other single mothers out there”
- “I was in a huge mess; she guided me through to understand where I am at, and what I wanted, which steps I should follow. She is quite resourceful; she linked me with the services that meet my exact needs. And I will not forget how she helped me to gain some confidence in my abilities and capabilities; which is the key factor to make the path so clear for me”.

Confidence and advocacy skills

- “I feel like I deserve a job, a higher education and a better future. I feel like it’s possible for me to get these things now and have put it into motion.”
- “More confidence and understanding in which direction to go in with training and employment”
- “I have confidence to move forward, I know more about myself and things I need to work on to move forward. I am now asking for help which I never have before”
- “Confidence to speak up for myself. Understanding that no one, including my family can control my life and what I do”
- “Bloom has helped increase my confidence levels, find my voice to advocate for myself and my family as well as helped me navigate services moving forward to best support my family”
- “Before Bloom I felt like I was stuck in life with not knowing really what to do , but since having Bloom come into my life, I have so much more confidence and feel more empowered In taking the next step with the reconnect program and just going on from there”.

Bloom made women aware of services available to support them in the community, gave women someone who understood to talk to, built confidence, provided material support, gave tailored advice for dealing with ex-partners or other relationships, as well as practical steps to work towards career and study aspirations. These impacts arose from the program embracing single mothers holistically, meeting them where they were, and working with them one-on-one, without judgement.

6. Do these impacts match the needs of the target population?

This evaluation has tracked the changes that Bloom brought to participants' lives. In thinking about the broader impact of Bloom it is important to reflect on how participants noted ongoing difficulties in their lives, including ongoing financial hardship and challenges of sole parenting. This insight suggests that the individual practical support of a program like Bloom can only go so far when single mothers are faced with major structural barriers that need significant structural and policy reform.

Financial difficulties and challenges faced by single mothers are not individual problems but are symptoms of much larger policy and economic structural barriers that marginalise single mothers. This section outlines some of these broader structural realities faced by single mothers living within a society and economy that devalues and undermines unpaid care and generates violence against them.

In the Australian society and economy, there is disavowal of unpaid care work and a glorification of paid work - single mothers are expected to do it all. On top of this, too many single mothers are single because partners have failed in their responsibilities and women are often escaping traumatic and even violent relationships.

Care is an essential part of life; it grows people, nourishes people, and no one can live without it. There is no society or economy without the care work of raising the young, caring for the elderly, maintaining homes, building and sustaining communities and the vast work of ecological care. Care work is largely unpaid (and if not unpaid then, underpaid), and it is feminised. The market economy relies on this social reproduction – it also cannot function without it. Unpaid care is valued in so far as it is a condition of our functioning, yet this work is treated as if it is free. Single mothers are expected to do both paid and unpaid work, without accounting for the huge amount of unpaid care work they do.

Policy guidelines have largely failed to recognise this reality experienced by single mothers. The social security system has been unforgiving of women not in paid work, regardless of the unpaid care work they do. This has been the case for 'mutual obligation' systems that overlook unpaid care work and social reproduction more broadly.

We note here that these systems place obligations on recipients of:

- Parenting Payment Single - to apply for 20 jobs per month
- Parents on Job Seeker payment – to undertake 15-20 hours of paid work or study
- And during 2018-2023, mandatory participation in the ParentsNext program for recipients of Parenting Payment who had a youngest child of under six years.

All these 'obligations' have been shown to cause parental stress, particularly when payment is suspended or ceased.

Welfare conditionality policies such as mutual obligations (see above) ignore unpaid care and assume value lies only in financially remunerated forms of work. These programs punish people, including single mothers, who undertake unpaid care work such as raising children simply because they are not in paid employment, or have insecure relations with the employment market.

Policy guidelines have also failed to deal with the domestic violence crisis facing many women, including single mothers and their children. For example, Summers (2022) notes that 185,700 women with children aged under 18 were living as single mothers after leaving violent relationships. “They represent 60 per cent of all single mothers, a far higher rate of violence than for any other group of Australian women. (The average rate is 1 in 6 women, or 17.3 per cent). It is important to note that these women were married or in de facto relationships when the violence occurred and are single now because of the violence¹.” Appendix 1 outlines some of the policy changes that have been taking place since Bloom was initiated.

Given these structural issues, Bloom is not a silver bullet, and wider structural change is needed to help single mothers. However, with all single mothers are up against, Bloom does help women deal with their day to day lives as best they can, to think through the help they need, and offer practical solutions to ease the pressure and address challenges they are up against, all via a nuanced, holistic approach to the single mother conundrum, which is often lumped in with gender inequity in general.

This is a highly intersectional issue that stands apart from processes to address gender inequity for married mothers and women in general.

7. What operational and implementation challenges does Bloom face?

The analysis of the operational and implementation challenges reveals four main areas. This analysis draws mainly on interviews with the Bloom Facilitator and Council of Single Mothers and their Children staff.

a) Recruitment

Recruitment to fill all eight spots of each Bloom program was difficult. There are various possible reasons for this:

- The cohort that Bloom engages with, mostly low-income single mothers, have a lot of competing demands for their time and energy. This makes it hard for women to commit to Bloom. There are some very specific structural impacts too that have impacted women’s time including recovering from the stress of COVID-19 lockdowns, poverty, and the pressures of the extended cost of living and housing crises.
- There is also for prospective participants, stigma linked to external employment programs for single mothers because of ParentsNext (now known as Parents Pathways and voluntary rather than mandatory), and the requirements of mutual obligations. This stigma impacted the voluntary take up of Bloom. The government’s policy of ParentsNext has left a bad taste in the mouths of single mothers who have been pursued by government and providers under the punitive mutual obligations system. This has stigmatised the employment industry making it harder for women to trust external employment programs. In response to this, CSMC designed Bloom to be less of an employment-ready program, and framed around careers, work and wellbeing, with the Facilitator’s communications focused on Bloom’s capacity to enhance decisionmaking and self-care.
- Many services and women in the Bloom regions did not know about CSMC and so the Facilitator needed to build relations in each community for Bloom to commence. This

¹ Summers, D. (2022) The Choice: Violence or Poverty, <https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/the-choice-violence-or-poverty>

impacted enrolments of Bloom as relationships and trust needed to be built. However, word travelled fast. For example, one regional employment facilitator of a Local Jobs Taskforce (Workforce Australia) provider was really impressed by Bloom and facilitated the program being offered to women in Wodonga (see below).

- As an additional recruitment incentive, the facilitator was able to get Bloom recognised as a PBAS (points-based activation system/mutual obligation approved activity). Single mothers are mandated to acquire 60 points per month to stay in receipt of their benefit. This meant that those subject to mutual obligation had a more relevant, specifically single mother focused support program to choose to engage in for two months, rather than other activities that can be irrelevant, unhelpful or biased to the employment service providers' (ESP) outcomes.

The Facilitator and CSMC collaborated with various organisations to help with recruitment over time, including partnering with a Workforce Australia regional employment facilitator, an NGO, and a community housing provider.

- The Workforce Australia facilitator had access and influence over several employment service providers in Wodonga and so Bloom was able to be offered through these services, including as part of mutual obligation requirements where relevant.
- For the Wodonga program, five of the women enrolled came from a ParentsNext service but volunteered to do the program.
- The ESP relationship provided support through job coaching services, and the provision of resources including laptops.

Despite these positive outcomes, this result is not a reason to support compulsion more broadly, as it is compulsion that has created distrust in such programs in the first place (and could be part of the reason why CSMC had to collaborate with the Workforce Australia provider to enhance outcomes for their participants).

b) Duration of Bloom

From case study discussions with women, it was suggested that Bloom could be offered for a longer period of time. Women really enjoyed the program and did not want it to end. Participants reported that they had just started getting results from the program, when it ended, and that with more time in Bloom, more results could be achieved. Others also valued the discussions and help from the facilitator and felt ongoing support sessions would continue to see them flourish.

c) Continue policy advocacy for single mothers

One Bloom participant in in-depth interviews encouraged CSMC to continue their policy advocacy work for single mothers, specifically to help employers better understand the challenges faced by single mothers looking for employment. She said, "I would recommend that the organisation also develop connections and understanding within corporates around facts about single mother households and to actually enable placements for single mothers who often need flexible working conditions". This suggestion is important given the broader structural and policy barriers single mothers are up against (see discussion in section 6).

With more funding, this may have been CSMC's next iteration of the Bloom program, a broader contextualised employer education program on how to engage, recruit and retain a valuable single mother workforce.

d) Facilitator burnout

Bloom is a highly specialist program working closely with single mothers on a one-on-one basis. It relies on the facilitator's skills and knowledge of local services, as well as skilled ways of supporting and engaging with participants. It needs a facilitator (or a team of facilitators) committed and focused on the women they are working with. The program employed one facilitator who not only ran the programs but did all of the individual counselling and supports, business engagement, promotional activities recruitment and design. Given the recruitment issues outlined earlier, it had a toll on the facilitator. This is not a flaw in the program logic *per se*, just an important reflection that any future program would need to develop a team around program facilitation to help deliver the unique and diverse needs of the program.

8. Do the findings from the evaluation support the Bloom theory of change? If not, what would be a more appropriate theory of change?

The theory of change underpinning Bloom contends that:

1. **If we** provide individual holistic support for single mothers to develop personalised pathways to employment, identify support for their barriers to paid work, and build peer supports and local engagement through place-based groups
2. **We will** raise participating single mothers' self-esteem, address employment barriers, and increase employability potential
3. **So that** single mothers can secure employment that complements their family responsibilities and aligns with their interests
4. **Leading to** greater wellbeing, health and financial security for single mothers and their children, now and in the future.

Participants consistently noted that a major asset of the Bloom program was that it was a program designed and run by single mothers, for single mothers. The inherent single mother perspective of Bloom is an important feature to be noted in the theory of change. So at point 1, it would be valuable to revise to "If we provide a **single mother focused program** delivering individual holistic support for single mothers to develop personalised pathways to employment, identify support for their barriers to paid work, and build peer supports and local engagement through place-based groups".

The evaluation suggests that the theory of change could focus less on building confidence, as individual's confidence was not so much the issue but rather the lack of connections and practical solutions to major structural barriers women were facing. Sometimes women just did not have the knowledge about how to solve issues - such as not knowing which services were in their area, if they were eligible, or even how to approach them.

This is not to say that confidence is not significant, but rather that the theory of change could consider the inclusion of practical problem solving. This would mean replacing at point 2 from "We will raise participating single mothers' self-esteem, address employment barriers, and increase employability potential" to "We will provide tailored practical support to support women aligned with their aspirations and structural barriers they encounter".

Similarly, consider changing at point 3 "So that single mothers can secure employment that complements their family responsibilities and aligns with their interests" to "**So that single mothers can solve problems that impact wellbeing and work towards their aspirations including securing employment that complements their family responsibilities and aligns with their interests**".

There is also a need to focus on the structural marginalisation of women – there is only so much individual change can do for single mothers living in an economy and society that undermines their value and work. This is to note the broader advocacy work of Council of Single Mothers and their Children, and so would be worth noting this in the context of Bloom.

9. What are the policy implications coming from this evaluation?

There are four areas where Bloom has implications for policy. First is the importance of programs targeting single mothers being designed and run by single mothers, or in the very least those who have single mother exposure or upbringing. Second, programs for single mothers need to move away from focusing just on employment, training and education. Third, there is a need to move away from the deficit mutual obligations frame in government employment services. Bloom is an alternative to the model currently underpinning Workforce Australia. Fourth, the critical role an educated facilitator/social worker plays in running successful programs.

1) Program targeting single mothers need to be developed through the lens of single mothers.

Single mothers are faced with a myriad of challenges that impact the wellbeing of themselves and their children.

In our entry survey, we provided the following list of potential barriers to entering employment, study and career opportunities. Participants agreed with all options, with the first two attracting 71% agreement, the next three 42%, five attracting 28% agreement and the final one agreed with by 14%.

- The juggle and demands of single parenting children
- Stress or trauma post family break up
 - Social and personal isolation
 - Mental or physical health challenges
 - Lack of employment, training and careers support in my region
 - Access to transport
 - Access and affordability of childcare
 - Lack of financial capacity
 - Low confidence and skills currency, nervous to return to work
 - My child/ren have special needs or a disability
 - Workforce Australia and mutual obligations you have to do

The above responses highlight significant obstacles that single mothers are facing and emphasise the need for a single mother lens to be applied to the broad policy and structural barriers that impact single mothers' lives.

Reasons women cite for not getting into employment are diverse and none are about needing to be compelled, which is the underlying assumption of the mutual obligation framing. Parenting is valuable and when in the care of only one parent, children require 24/7 parental attention; often even when part of that time involves school or childcare, parents need to be available. Thus, to apply for and commit to work or study, there needs to be a significant aligning of personal issues and system supports. The Bloom Program shows that working with single mothers through a single mother lens is critical to finding holistic and viable paths forward.

Often we hear women whose husbands are often away for work say they feel like they are a single mother. However, being a single mother involves unique experiences not shared by other parents, in particular sole carriage of financial and decision-making responsibilities; lack of respite; isolation; and for some the challenges of shared care and the organisation, communication and emotions that

can be associated for parents and children. Thus programs targeting single mothers need people who understand this context – namely, women with lived expertise of being a single parent.

With lived experience and professional design and service skills, a tailored program can offer the supportive and strength-based environment required and can strategise with this lived reality in mind.

If we are to help women find ways through challenges they are facing, it must never be paternalistic or undermine their extraordinary agency. It is very skilled work.

2) Programs for single mothers need to move away from focusing just on employment, training and education.

In interviews and in open-ended responses to survey questions, participants reported how different Bloom is to other current programs targeting the single mother cohort. Through participant testimony and through observations of the one-to-one sessions, we assert that Bloom provided a very different program to what women had been offered before by government and other community providers.

The Facilitator demonstrated genuine care regarding women's current position in their lives, and maximised her effort and skill to work with women in a strengths-based way honouring both their specific challenges and individual aspirations. Much of the focus in Bloom sessions was about working on specific obstacles in participants' immediate lives that could be modified to make way for employment, rather than about getting women immediately into employment.

- Sometimes the barriers could be as simple as having the confidence to ask for help or courage to leave the house.
- Other times it was about providing pre-employment support such as computer literacy programs, finding funds to set up home Wi-Fi, or applying for their driver's licence.

With the Facilitator's capacity to identify what was needed, and the provision of clear and workable steps, women felt able to take steps forward, and all women in the program did work on these steps toward practical outcomes. These are the steps often missed in the push for key performance indicators and outcomes in the Services Australia/ Workforce Australia employment schemes. A system calibrated for the generic needs of all does not cater to the intersectional and nuanced needs of a minority.

Many of the Bloom programs were also place-based and thus the facilitator was able to link women with existing services once she had screened them for competency in working with single mothers. The link with local services meant that women had more people to work with in their community beyond Bloom. Post Bloom, participants also have both links to other past participants and links to appropriate services in their community.

Bloom was very focused about what women want to do next in their lives, identifying clear steps to start moving toward their goals. Often these steps included linking in with services in the communities in which women are living that they had not identified or utilised.

3) A move away from the deficit/ mutual obligations frame is critical. Bloom is an alternative to the model currently underpinning Workforce Australia.

There are very clear differences between Bloom and Mutual Obligation programs offered by the government through Workforce Australia.

Below are some key learnings about what Bloom does which is lacking in many other programs. These insights were developed through observations of Bloom sessions, survey data and case study interviews, along with published research into ParentsNext and Workforce Australia programs.

- a) The work of supporting single mothers is highly skilled, focused, and time intensive. This is not work for people who do not have the training, compassion or time to do this work properly. Participants need to be able to connect with those they are working with and forge a relationship of trust. They also need to be able to develop strategies that work for the women that are achievable, appropriate and actionable linked to women's aspirations. The facilitators also need to be committed to each participant, providing follow up between sessions when necessary to get the best possible outcome for the woman, as well as providing engaged follow up.
- b) People need a trusted facilitator or case manager who can work with them in a tailored and focused way. Lived expertise of being a single mother makes a difference to participants, as does a case manager's experience and expertise in relation to the social security system and current requirements that apply to single mother benefits.
- c) Participants benefit from information on where to access local assistance. Frequently, Bloom participants did not know all or indeed any of the services in the area and benefited from a warm introduction. Some also needed support to initially attend these services, provided via a Zoom meeting, assisted phone call or direct referral.
- d) Genuine care for the participants is paramount. Blooms sessions were nurturing and caring spaces where the whole human was engaged, while many Job Active participants report that meetings feel like a 'box ticking exercise', leaving individuals feeling that they are dispensable to the service.

Mutual obligations and ParentsNext may have done damage to the take up of programs like Bloom for single mothers. For over a decade (longer for mutual obligations), punitive and harsh government programs have dominated government support. They have damaged the trust women have in asking for help from the government or government funded programs. Time and energy are now needed to desensitise people from mutual obligations and the stigma around government services for single women receiving social security.

4) A skilled facilitator or social worker needs to run these programs.

The work of running a program such as Bloom needs to be undertaken by people with considerable experience and skills to provide unconditional, strengths-based support that harnesses practical steps to link women into job paths that fit with their aspirations.

It was clear from the observations of Bloom sessions that the Bloom facilitator had a range of relevant skills and was a key factor in the program's success. Her tenacity and rounded care were also important, as building trust is a big aspect of the success of a program such as Bloom.

Single mothers have often had profound experiences of being let down – so a commitment to a program such as this requires integrity and follow through.

The comment below from a participants indicates the value provided by a lived experience and expert facilitator:

“She understood very well my specific situation from being constricted by not receiving child support and having two children still in my care and being carer of my father but still wanting to stay in the workforce. She helped me clarify a lot of issue in choosing courses. Because unlike TAFE she isn’t selling me a course, only trying to really, really help”.

Conclusion

The Bloom Program provides a model for alternative programming that aims to support single mothers. It provides a sound example about how community organisations and services could design a program that supports single mothers to work through challenges in their lives and towards aspirations that are important to them and their children.

There is much to learn from the Bloom Program. Four major findings coming from the Bloom evaluation are:

1. *Programs targeting single mothers need to be developed through the lens of single mothers.* Reasons women cited for not getting into employment are diverse and programs need to be flexible in supporting women based on their needs. Being a single mother is a unique experience – and so programs targeting single mothers need to be designed and delivered by people who share this, otherwise they risk underestimating or misunderstanding the diverse and intersecting needs of single mothers.
2. *Programs for single mothers need to move away from focusing just on employment, training and education:* Bloom is different to other programs targeting single mothers. This is because it is not just about moving women into employment in a one size fits all approach, nor expecting vocational and career barriers to be overcome with simplistic short term solutions. Bloom considers women holistically. It is strengths-based and provides single mothers with tailored, practical and workable steps to support their aspirations in a meaningful way.
3. *A move away from the deficit/mutual obligations frame is critical for programs targeting single mothers.* Bloom is an alternative to the model currently underpinning Workforce Australia employment programs. There are very clear differences between Bloom and the former ParentsNext and other Mutual Obligation programs offered by the government. Imposing obligations on mothers already obligated to manage so much, including family court cases, family violence, children with disabilities, poverty, inadequate housing and health issues, does not create positive outcomes for many.
4. *A skilled facilitator/ social worker with lived experience as a single mother is best placed to run these programs:* The work of running a program such as Bloom needs to be undertaken by people with considerable experience, insight and skills to provide unconditional, strengths-based support delivering practical steps to link women into communities that fit with their aspirations. The Bloom Facilitator had considerable skill and was a key factor in the program’s success.

Appendix 1: Policy Landscape of the Bloom Program

The Bloom Program was introduced at a time of change in Federal and State policies impacting the lives of single mothers. As such, the cohort of single mothers that Bloom engaged were impacted by a broad and complex assemblage of policies that impacted their lives directly and indirectly. Whilst policy analysis focuses individually on each of these areas, the culmination of the policies together further impact women's lives.

Policies and programs impacting single mothers included:

ParentsNext: Bloom was first introduced at a time when the Federal government was redesigning social programs for single mothers after its 'ParentsNext' program was abolished.

ParentsNext was a punitive and compulsory mutual obligation program running from 2016 to 2023 that targeted parents with children under six who received the Parenting Payment, the majority of whom were single mothers.

- People placed on ParentsNext were compelled to develop a participation plan with the service provider, which included agreeing to specific activities that parents would undertake.
- Some of these activities and compliance measures that were prescribed were not relevant or of assistance to the individuals.
- Attending these activities was not voluntary.
- ParentsNext participants were expected to fulfil these activities as part of the compliance requirement, which also included requirements to attend provider appointments and regularly self-report any income (or absence of it). Failure to attend activities or to self-report could result in the suspension or cessation of parenting payments - often participants' only source of income.

Due to a sustained campaign from community organisations and women subjected to ParentsNext, along with evidence showing the detrimental impacts of ParentsNext, the Federal government has recently abolished the program. However, the government remains committed to punitive mutual obligations for job seekers, and continues to have a focus on people receiving the Parenting Payment moving towards or into employment.

Parent Pathways: Since abolishing ParentsNext, the Federal government embarked on designing a voluntary new program for single parents with children under six called Parent Pathways. The program was launched in 2024 and unlike ParentsNext aims to provide personalised assistance and work-readiness preparation to eligible parents and carers of children.

Parenting Payment Single: While the recent increase in access to this payment until the youngest child turns 14 (up from 8) has been a benefit for the 73,000 single parents, the cut-off date of age 14 remains a concern for many mothers in the government income system. CSMC and collaborators have lobbied for the return of the cut off to when the youngest child is 16 years of age. This is very important for single parents who maybe outside the paid workforce for long periods and who will lose any parenting allowance from Centrelink when their youngest is 16, regardless of dependency.

Child support: This has long been a challenge for single mothers and there is officially \$1.7 billion in outstanding payments owed to them (and much more if private child support agreements are included). Child support critically anchors families to volatile situations, including constant financial uncertainty and manipulation of children by payees. Further, child support payments are tied to

Centrelink via Family Tax Benefit debt, where a women can accrue a debt if late child support is paid in a lump sum.

Family Law: In 2023, changes to family law that centred on the safety of children and those caring for them were introduced. There is hope that these changes will lessen the damage to single mother families particularly, as courts should stop allowing vexatious claims by ex-partners. Regardless, family law decisions and processes heavily impact single mothers.

An understanding of the full policy assemblage impacting single mothers is critical to good policy and supportive programing. We saw all aspects of this policy assemblage, plus more, impacting the lives of single mothers engaged in Bloom. Understandin the full policy assemblage is a significant theme in understanding the complexity of single mothers' lives when developing programs that support their needs and aspirations.

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