



Australian family property law: ‘Just and equitable’ outcomes?

*Belinda Fehlberg and Lisa Sarmas**

In this article we focus on the broad discretion under Australia’s Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) to reallocate interests in property of spouses and separating de facto partners. We look at previous empirical research on the discretion’s operation and consider options for change. We identify that there is a lack of up-to-date empirical research data on the discretion’s operation, and that there is potential risk and possibly limited effect associated with legislative reform in this area. Yet the consistent empirical research finding that women, particularly mothers with dependent children, experience significant economic disadvantage post-separation leads us to see some merit in legislative reform that identifies the need to provide for the material and economic security of the parties and their dependent children as key factors to be considered when making property orders.

I Introduction

Our article examines the broad discretion under Australia’s *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (*‘FLA’*) to reallocate interests in property of spouses and, since 2009, separating de facto partners¹ in the light of previous empirical research on the discretion’s operation. Although acknowledging the lack of up-to-date empirical research data on the discretion’s operation, and the potential risks and possibly limited effect of legislative reform, the consistent empirical research finding that women, particularly mothers with dependent² children, experience significant economic disadvantage post-separation prompts us to formulate a proposal for legislative change that identifies the need to provide for the material and economic security of the parties and their dependent children as key factors to be considered when making property orders. We

* The authors are colleagues at Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne. This article forms part of a shorter piece to appear in *The Cambridge Companion to Comparative Family Law*, to be edited by Shazia Choudry and Jonathan Herring, and to be published by Cambridge University Press. Thanks to the Cambridge Seminar participants, Patrick Parkinson and the anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

1 ‘De facto relationship’ for the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (*‘FLA’*) is defined as a couple (different sex or same sex), who are not legally married to each other, are not related by family, and have had ‘a relationship as a couple living together on a genuine domestic basis’ (s 4AA(1)). For financial orders, the *FLA* also requires a de facto relationship of at least 2 years’ duration, a child of the relationship, or that a party has made substantial contributions such that a failure to make an order would lead to serious injustice (s 90SB). See further Belinda Fehlberg et al, *Australian Family Law: The Contemporary Context* (Oxford University Press, 2015) 20–2, 91–8, 495–6.

2 Which we define as children of the parties aged under 18, and children of the parties aged over 18 who are completing their education or have a mental or physical disability (consistent with *FLA* s 66L which provides for court-ordered maintenance for children over 18 in these circumstances). While the current financial provisions of the *FLA* refer only to children of the parties aged under 18 (eg, ss 72(1), 75(2)), we consider that an extension paralleling s 66L is warranted.

suggest that the structure of the current legislation places too great a focus on the parties' contributions and that a reformulation to prioritise the provision of suitable housing for dependent children, followed by consideration of the parties' material³ and economic security would increase the likelihood of outcomes that are more fundamentally consistent with the key legislative requirement that '[t]he court shall not make an order ... unless it is satisfied that, in all the circumstances, it is just and equitable to make the order'.⁴

There are several reasons why it seems important to focus on Australian family property law now. In May 2017, the Australian federal Attorney-General announced a major review of the family law system, to be undertaken by the Australian Law Reform Commission. The inquiry is now underway, and the final report is due by 31 March 2019. The Inquiry's widely-cast terms of reference include 'the underlying substantive rules and general law principles in relation to ... property'.⁵ Inclusion of property is significant given that Australian family property law has not been the subject of major law reform proposals since 1999.⁶ Lack of law reform attention has been striking — and concerning given that the adverse economic consequences of separation and divorce for women in the short and longer term continue to be identified by Australian empirical research (Section III (A)),⁷ due mainly to their still greater role as the primary carers of children during and after heterosexual relationships end.⁸ These consequences are known to be particularly serious for some groups of women, especially mothers with dependent children (but also older divorced mothers whose children are no longer dependent: a smaller group that has received less

3 We have included the concept of 'material' as well as 'economic' security on the basis that 'economic security' tends to be understood as meaning financial security. Put another way: '[m]aterial wellbeing is a broader concept' and 'income measures alone are insufficient to properly understand poverty — or ... a life with dignity': see, eg, Tanya Corrie, 'Economic Security for Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence: Understanding and Measuring the Impact' (Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, 2016) 37. Further elaboration of the precise elements that constitute material, as distinct from economic, security is beyond the scope of this article, but might include, eg, a safe home for a party escaping family violence.

4 *FLA* s 79(2) or s 90SM(3).

5 George Brandis, Attorney-General (Australia), 'First Comprehensive Review of the Family Law Act' (Media Release, 27 September 2017). An issues paper released by the Australian Law Reform Commission ('ALRC') in March 2018 noted that '[a] number of suggestions have been made for changes to the *Family Law Act's* property regime': ALRC, *Review of the Family Law System*, Issues Paper No 48 (2018) 48 [152].

6 Commonwealth (Australia), 'Property and Family Law: Options for Change' (Discussion Paper, 30 March 1999). On earlier proposals for reform, see Margaret Harrison, 'Matrimonial property reform' [1992] (31) *Family Matters* 18.

7 Eg, David de Vaus et al, 'The Economic Consequences of Divorce in Australia' (2014) 28 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 26.

8 Eg, Australian Institute of Family Studies ('AIFS'), 'Mothers still do the lion's share of housework' (Research Summary, AIFS, 2016): 'Becoming a mother heralds a dramatic change in the lives of Australian women. New mothers go from spending a weekly average of 2 hours caring for others to a whopping 51 hours'; Lixia Qu et al, 'Post-separation parenting, property and relationship dynamics after five years' (Report, AIFS, 2014): 'Most children were in the care of their mother for the majority of nights or all nights per year (ie, 66–100 per cent of nights) in each wave, with around three-quarters being in such an arrangement in Wave 3': at xvi. See further Belinda Fehlberg, Lisa Sarmas and Jenny Morgan, 'The Perils and Pitfalls of Formal Equality in Australian Family Law Reform' (2018) 46 *Federal Law Review* (in press).

research focus),⁹ victims of family violence¹⁰ and women leaving low-asset relationships.¹¹ Private transfers alone cannot be expected to fully resolve post-separation poverty¹²: ‘people who divorce have substantially lower incomes, assets, and employment rates pre-divorce than people who remain married’,¹³ two households will be more expensive to run than one, and commonly pre-separation family arrangements will result in one party having a much reduced income earning capacity. However, property division under the *FLA* remains an important strategy for reducing post-separation financial disadvantage.¹⁴ Clearly, in order to maximise the potential of this strategy, law and the family law system¹⁵ need to be accessible and responsive. After many years of significant research, policy, and law reform focus on post-separation parenting law and process¹⁶ (including the relevance of family violence and abuse in this context,¹⁷ along with the operation of the Child Support Program),¹⁸ it is timely to also reflect on the operation of the key principles guiding property division in Australian family law.

9 Susan Feldman and Harriet Radermacher, ‘Time of Our Lives? Building Opportunity and Capacity for the Economic and Social Participation of Older Australian Women’ (Report, Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation, 2016) 21–2; Bruce Smyth and Ruth Weston, ‘Financial living standards after divorce: A recent snapshot’ (Research Report No 23, AIFS, December 2000). In Britain, see Mike Brewer and Alita Nandi, ‘Partnership dissolution: how does it affect income, employment and well-being?’ (Working Paper No 2014-30, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 10 September 2014).

10 Grania Sheehan and Bruce Smyth, ‘Spousal Violence and Post-separation Financial Outcomes’ (2000) 14 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 102; Emma Smallwood, *Stepping Stones: Legal Barriers to Economic Equality after Family Violence* (Women’s Legal Service (Vic), 2015); Rae Kaspiew and Lixia Qu, ‘Property division after separation: Recent research evidence’ (2016) 30 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 1. See also House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, Parliament of Australia, *Parliamentary Inquiry into a Better Family Law System to Support and Protect Those Affected by Family Violence*, 16 March 2017, 159 ch 5. On the inadequacies of *FLA* and judicial approaches to the treatment of family violence in property disputes, see Patricia Easta, Lisa Young and Anna Carline, ‘Domestic Violence, Property and Family Law in Australia’ (2018) 32 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 204.

11 It should be noted that most separating spouses and de facto partners have low or modest property to divide (Section III), and receipt of a just and equitable share of available property remains important in a context where every dollar counts. This issue is the focus of Women’s Legal Service (Vic) (‘WLS(V)'), ‘Small Claims, Large Battles: Achieving economic equality in the family law system’ (Report, March 2018).

12 Raising questions regarding the extent of individual (‘local’), partner (‘horizontal’) and state (‘vertical’) responsibility: Joanna Miles, ‘Responsibility in Family Finance and Property Law’ in Jo Bridgeman, Heather Keating and Craig Lind, *Regulating Family Responsibilities* (Ashgate, 2011) 91, 92.

13 de Vaus et al, above n 7, 42.

14 Belinda Fehlberg, Christine Millward and Monica Campo, ‘Post-separation parenting arrangements, child support and property settlement: Exploring the connections’ (2010) 24 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 214.

15 While not our focus in this article, it is clear that many women in Australia cannot pursue property settlements due to paucity of legal aid for family property matters and absence of avenues other than courts and lawyers for resolving cases involving low assets: see Smallwood, above n 10 and WLS(V), above n 11.

16 See Section V.

17 Ibid.

18 Most recently, see House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, Parliament of Australia, *From conflict to cooperation: Inquiry into the Child Support Program* (2015); Australian Government, *Response to the House of Representatives*

II Existing framework

The starting point for Australian family property law is a separate property regime, under which no automatic co-ownership arises from being married or in a de facto relationship.¹⁹ Under the *FLA*, judges have considerable power to reallocate interests in property of spouses and of separating de facto partners.²⁰ First, ‘property’ is defined broadly, to mean property to which the parties, or either of them, ‘are entitled, whether in possession or reversion’²¹ and has been given a broad construction by the family law courts.²² Second, the jurisdiction of courts under the *FLA* extends to all of the property of the parties at the date of the trial, whether acquired before their relationship began, during their relationship or after their relationship ended.²³ Third, the discretion to alter interests of the parties in their property is cast very broadly. Specifically, the legislation provides that, ‘[i]n property settlement proceedings, the court may make such order as it considers *appropriate* ... altering the interests of the parties to the marriage in the property’.²⁴ The *FLA* further provides that, ‘[t]he court shall not make an order under this section unless it is satisfied that, in all the circumstances, it is *just and equitable* to make the order’.²⁵

The legislation includes some guidance regarding the exercise of discretion, by means of a checklist of factors that ‘the court shall take into account’ in ‘considering what order (if any) should be made’.²⁶ The list refers first to contributions (financial and non-financial, direct and indirect) made by or on

Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs report: From conflict to cooperation — Inquiry into the Child Support Program (2016).

- 19 In contrast to an immediate (or full) community property regime, in which ‘property defined as being matrimonial and acquired during marriage is immediately and automatically owned equally by husband and wife throughout the marriage, and each takes an equal share if the marriage ends’: Harrison, above n 6, 19.
- 20 The requirement of relationship breakdown in the case of de facto partners (but not spouses: *Stanford v Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108 (*Stanford*)) reflects the terms of the referral of powers from the states to the Commonwealth, which provided the basis for the federal Parliament to legislate in 2009. A referral of power was required due to the marriage-focused content of the federal Parliament’s legislative power under the *Australian Constitution* ss 51(xxi), (xxii), (xxxvii).
- 21 *FLA* s 4(1) (definition of ‘property’).
- 22 The case often cited for this point is *Re Duff* [1977] FLC 90-217: the Full Court of the Family Court of Australia (the Full Court) gave its support to a broad definition of ‘property’ found in *Jones v Skinner* (1835) 5 LJ Ch 90, an old English case: ‘Property is the most comprehensive of all terms which can be used inasmuch as it is indicative and descriptive of every possible interest which the party can have’: *Re Duff* [1977] FLC 90-217, 76,133. The Full Court considered that ‘property’ for the *FLA* extended to real and personal property, and choses in action (ie, property that comprises a bundle of rights but has no physical form — eg, company shares).
- 23 This is in contrast to the more limited definition of matrimonial property in many other jurisdictions, including Scotland, New Zealand and British Columbia. In Scotland, eg, ‘matrimonial property’ for the purposes of the ‘sharing principle’ (but not the remaining four principles) does not include property acquired by the parties before their relationship began (unless acquired ‘for use by them as a family home or as furniture or furnishings for such home’), after their cohabitation ended, or ‘by way of gift or succession from a third party’: *Family Law (Scotland) Act 1985* (Scot) ss 9–10 (Section V).
- 24 *FLA* ss 79(1)(a) (spouses), 90SM(1)(a) (de factos) (emphasis added).
- 25 *Ibid* ss 79(2) (spouses), 90SM(2)(a) (de factos) (emphasis added).
- 26 *Ibid* ss 79(4) (spouses), 90SM(4) (de factos).

behalf of the parties to property of either or both of them (including property they have ceased to own since making the contribution) and to the welfare of their family. The list then refers to additional factors relating to the parties' respective economic futures;²⁷ these factors are also relevant to spousal and de facto maintenance, which can be ordered if the respondent has the capacity to pay and the applicant (usually female) is unable to support herself adequately.²⁸ Responsibility for care of children of the parties under age 18 is included as a factor relevant to the parties' financial futures.

The physical structure of the legislation thus *encourages* (but does not *require*) contributions to property to be considered first. This encouragement is reinforced by the inclusion of two property-related contributions, followed by only one in relation to contributions to the welfare to the family. Factors addressing economic disparity between the parties follow, mainly through reference to the additional factors. Our point here is that the ordering of the list encourages a perception²⁹ that contributions to property are the first concern, a point backed up by jurisprudence: judgments most commonly involve consideration of contributions before needs. Express consideration of compensation for costs of investing in the relationship or to enable loss sharing more broadly is possible but much rarer.³⁰ The form of the legislation is thus in marked contrast to the position in England and Wales under the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1973* (England and Wales), where one list of factors applies to determine property and spousal maintenance disputes with 'first consideration being given to the welfare while a minor of any child of the family who has not attained the age of eighteen';³¹ matters relating to the parties' futures, their contributions, and questions of fault are also to be considered.³²

In 2012 in *Stanford v Stanford*,³³ the High Court of Australia underlined the breadth of the s 79 discretion, encouraging increased uncertainty regarding how it would be exercised from case to case. The Court emphasised the centrality of the requirement in *FLA* s 79(2) that it must be 'just and equitable' for a court to make a property settlement order, while also conveying the amplitude of that expression:

The expression 'just and equitable' is a qualitative description of a conclusion reached after examination of a range of potentially competing considerations. It does not admit of exhaustive definition. It is not possible to chart its metes and bounds.³⁴

27 In particular, *ibid* s 79(4)(e) incorporating s 75(2) (spouses); s 90SM(4) incorporating s 90SF(3) (de factos).

28 *Ibid* ss 72(1) (spouses), 90SF(1) (de factos).

29 Consistent with this, see Karl Halvor Teigen et al, 'Long live the King! Beginnings loom larger than endings of past and recurrent events' (2017) 163 *Cognition* 26, who 'argue that beginnings loom larger than endings by attracting more attention, being judged as more important and interesting, warranting more explanation, and having more causal power': at 26.

30 *Waters v Jurek* (1995) 20 Fam LR 190.

31 *Matrimonial Causes Act 1973* (England and Wales) s 25(1).

32 *Ibid* s 25(2).

33 (2012) 247 CLR 108. The case has been applied to de facto property disputes: *Watson v Ling* (2013) 49 Fam LR 303.

34 *Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108, 120 [36].

Stanford reminded family law courts of the requirement to determine whether it is just and equitable to make *any* order departing from existing interests in property. However, the High Court indicated that ‘in many cases’ involving separation the requirement would be ‘readily satisfied’, as ‘there is not and will not thereafter be the common *use* of property by the husband and wife’.³⁵ The High Court also underlined that the ‘just and equitable’ requirement is fundamental to *the* property orders (if any) that are made. More broadly, at least in decisions of the Full Court of the Family Court of Australia, *Stanford*’s emphasis on the centrality of the ‘just and equitable’ requirement has discouraged the use of formulaic approaches that may risk pre-determining the outcome.³⁶ The impact of the latter message has been seen, for example, in the Full Court’s abandonment of the ‘doctrine of special skill’ (which accorded special recognition to ‘stellar’ income earners in cases involving very high assets),³⁷ and increased ambivalence regarding formulaic approaches where property has been dissipated by a party before trial³⁸ and in relation to property acquired pre- and post-relationship.³⁹

Before *Stanford*, the suggestion had sometimes been made that fundamental legislative reform to limit the breadth of the discretion afforded by s 79 should be considered.⁴⁰ Detailed consideration of the possibility of legislative reform last occurred at the governmental level in 1999,⁴¹ when the federal Attorney-General’s Department released a discussion paper suggesting two options for reform of family property law, the first involving the introduction of a legislative starting point of equal contributions and the second involving a starting point of equal sharing of property accumulated by spouses during their marriage. Neither proposal gained much support so no fundamental change to property division under the *FLA* occurred.

Following *Stanford*, discussion regarding the breadth of discretion afforded by ss 79 and 90SM has again been evident.⁴² In 2014 the Productivity

35 Ibid 122 [42] (emphasis in original). So far, *Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108 has had greatest impact in less usual fact scenarios, eg, a spousal relationship that had not broken down, representations by a husband to a wife during their relationship that the property is hers along with delay in pursuing his property claim (*Bevan v Bevan* (2013) 49 Fam LR 387), and relationships without children in which parties have maintained separate finances, and one has made significantly greater financial contributions than the other (*Watson v Ling* (2013) 49 Fam LR 303; *Elford v Elford* (2016) 55 Fam LR 247).

36 See further Fehlberg et al, *Australian Family Law*, above n 1, 548–73.

37 *Hoffman v Hoffman* (2014) 51 Fam LR 568:

there is no principle or guideline (or, indeed, anything else emerging from s 79), that renders the direct contribution of income or capital more important — or ‘special’ — when compared against indirect contributions and, in particular, contributions to the home or the welfare of the family: at 579 [52].

38 *Bevan v Bevan* (2013) 49 Fam LR 387, 402 [79]; cf *Vass v Vass* (2015) 53 Fam LR 373, 393–4 [135]–[140].

39 *Dickons v Dickons* (2012) 50 Fam LR 244, 249–50 [20]–[22]; *Marsh v Marsh* (2014) 51 Fam LR 540, 549–50 [62]–[67], 557 [107].

40 Eg, Patrick Parkinson, ‘Unfinished business: Reforming the law of property division’ (2000) 14(4) *Australian Family Lawyer* 1.

41 Commonwealth (Australia), above n 6. Change along similar lines was proposed in 1987 and 1992. See further Harrison, above n 6 and Parkinson, ‘Unfinished business’, above n 40. See also Rosemary Hunter, ‘Decades of panic’ (2005) *Griffith Review* <<https://griffithreview.com/articles/decades-of-panic/>>.

42 See in particular Patrick Parkinson, ‘Why are decisions on family property so inconsistent?’

Commission, an independent Commonwealth review and advisory agency on federal government microeconomic policy and regulation, looked briefly at family property law and recommended a presumption of equal sharing in its report on *Access to Justice Arrangements*.⁴³ It is possible that renewed interest post-*Stanford* was a temporary ‘blip’ as the implications of the decision were digested. However, the many years that have passed since fundamental property law reform was last considered in Australia, the impact of *Stanford*, at least in the Full Court, and the review into the family law system now being conducted by the Australian Law Reform Commission⁴⁴ suggest value in reflecting on the current operation of the discretion and whether there is a case for change.

III The overarching ‘just and equitable’ requirement (s 79(2)): Are ‘just and equitable’ outcomes being achieved?

As noted in Section II, the High Court in *Stanford* emphasised that the ‘just and equitable’ requirement must be satisfied for the court to make *any* order altering property interests and further, that this requirement informs *the* orders made (if any). The Court provided very little guidance as to the substantive meaning of ‘just and equitable’, but it is clear that the requirement will not be satisfied by reference merely to the factors set out in s 79(4) or s 90SM(4). Indeed, it is not essential that these factors be considered at all in determining the threshold question whether it is ‘just and equitable’ for any order to be made.⁴⁵

It is perhaps surprising that the content and meaning of the ‘just and equitable’ requirement is relatively undeveloped in Australian family law jurisprudence.⁴⁶ The answer partly lies in the pre-*Stanford* tendency to conclude that it was just and equitable to make an order for s 79(2) if matters referred to in s 79(4) were evident — an approach the High Court rejected: ‘The requirements of the two sub-sections are not to be conflated’.⁴⁷ In our view, further development and articulation of the ‘just and equitable’ requirement would provide an existing legislative basis for the advancement of principled and appropriate family property law outcomes.

A sensible first step in attempting to articulate the substantive content of the ‘just and equitable’ requirement is to consider what the available empirical research evidence tells us about the economic consequences of separation and

(2016) 90 *Australian Law Journal* 498. In terms consistent with his pre-*Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108 concerns, Parkinson argues that the law on family property in Australia is ‘plagued with uncertainty at its very core’ for reasons including ‘the lack of objects and principles in the legislation’: at 498. He concludes that ‘[t]he best option is statutory reform’: at 523.

43 Productivity Commission, *Access to Justice Arrangements*, Inquiry Report No 72, vol 2 (2014) 874. The Commission made no reference whatsoever to *Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108.

44 Brandis, above n 5.

45 *Chapman v Chapman* [2014] FamCAFC 91 (27 May 2014) [25].

46 For an analysis of the evolution of the ‘just and equitable’ requirement, see Christopher Turnbull, ‘In metes and bounds: Revisiting the just and equitable requirement in family law property settlements’ (2018) 31 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 159.

47 *Stanford v Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108, 120 [35].

divorce on the basis of the law as it stands, and the relevance of law to those outcomes. To that end, we first look at the broader socio-economic context in which Australian family property law operates, before considering what existing research tells us about property division in the separating population. We then consider research on approaches of family lawyers to property division, and the available research on adjudicated property cases. A key theme to emerge is that we lack current empirical data about the relevance and impact of the current legislation on the way property is divided in all these contexts. However, the available empirical data consistently demonstrates the significant economic disadvantage of women after separation — particularly mothers with dependent children — and also suggests that their interests are attracting insufficient attention in Australian family property law, a pattern which has negative flow-on effects for children.

A The socio-economic context

The broader empirical context for our analysis, which focuses on the operation of family property law, is ongoing empirical work indicating disproportionate poverty rates for women and children in Australia,⁴⁸ and adverse economic consequences of separation and divorce for women, particularly women with dependent children. Indeed, the most recent data suggest that this overall pattern has not changed since the 1980s,⁴⁹ the consistent finding in Australia (and other western countries, including the United Kingdom) being that ‘the financial impact of divorce is greater for women than it is for men’.⁵⁰

48 Australian Council of Social Service, *Poverty in Australia 2016* (Australian Council of Social Service, 2016); de Vaus et al, above n 7.

49 While there is US research suggesting that over time the position for women experiencing relationship separation has improved for reasons including women’s increased paid employment after having children and after relationships end, most is some years older than the Australian research discussed in our article. We also note recent UK research finding that after separation, ‘the costs of divorce have been mitigated for women over time and more recent divorces have not led to the same falls in household income as earlier divorces’: Hayley Fisher and Hamish Low, ‘Who Wins, Who Loses and Who Recovers from Divorce?’ in Joanna Miles and Rebecca Probert (eds), *Sharing Lives, Dividing Assets: An Inter-Disciplinary Study* (Hart Publishing, 2009) 241 ch 11, 255. However, in this and a more recent article Fisher and Low find that the financial impact of divorce continues to be greater for women than for men, that women’s recovery is mainly the result of repartnering (with women’s likelihood of repartnering being less than men’s) and that, ‘[t]here is no significant response in labour supply for men or for women’: Hayley Fisher and Hamish Low, ‘Recovery from Divorce: Comparing High and Low Income Couples’ (2016) 30 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 338, 339). See also Hayley Fisher and Hamish Low, ‘Divorce early or divorce late? The long-term financial consequences’ (2018) 32 *Australian Journal of Family Law*. For US examples, see Matthew McKeever and Nicholas H Wolfinger, ‘Shifting Fortunes in a Changing Economy: Trends in the Economic Well-Being of Divorced Women’ in Lori Kowaleski-Jones and Nicholas H Wolfinger (eds), *Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda* (Springer, 2005) 127; Sanford L Braver, Jenessa R Shapiro and Matthew R Goodman, ‘Consequences of Divorce for Parents’ in Mark A Fine and John H Harvey (eds), *Handbook of Divorce and Relationship Dissolution* (Routledge, 2006) 313; Christopher R Tamborini, Kenneth A Couch and Gayle L Reznik, ‘Long-term impact of divorce on women’s earnings across multiple divorce windows: A life course perspective’ (2015) 26 *Advances in Life Course Research* 44.

50 Fisher and Low, ‘Recovery from Divorce’, above n 49, 338. See further David de Vaus et al, ‘The economic consequences of divorce in six OECD countries’ (2017) 52 *Australian*

More broadly, a 2016 Report on Poverty in Australia conducted by the Australian Council of Social Service found that women are more likely than men to live in poverty as a result of their 'lower employment rates and lower wages ... and a greater caring role both for children and for other family members'.⁵¹ The Report also found that 'poverty in lone parent households has increased from 25.7% in 2003–04 to 29.1% in 2013–14'⁵² and that the percentage of children living in poverty in Australia is increasing (17.4 per cent), with 40.6 per cent of children in sole parent households living in poverty.⁵³ The authors of the Report concluded that '[t]he high rate of poverty experienced by children in lone parent households is a result of high rates of poverty among lone parent households overall.'⁵⁴

Most lone parent households are female-headed: in Australia in the 2016 Census, '[o]f all single-parent families, female single parents make up 82%, and male single parents make up 18%'.⁵⁵

While lone parent households do not always arise from parental separation, nearly half (48 per cent in 2015) of divorces in Australia involve children aged under 18, and following divorce most children live for most of the time with their mothers (97 per cent) according to a recent AMP/NATSEM report.⁵⁶

There is a close connection between women's and children's poverty and the negative economic consequences of divorce for women and children, identified over many years now in Australian research. This includes recent analysis by David de Vaus and colleagues of data from the first 10 years, that is, 2001–10, of an ongoing panel survey of Australian families, 'to estimate the impact of divorce (a term they used to also include separated but not divorced spouses and de facto separations) on income and assets'⁵⁷ for separating men and women aged between 20–54 years. De Vaus and colleagues found that women experienced a fall in equivalised household income (a measure of household income that takes into account differences in household size and composition) post-divorce while men experienced a significant increase:

For women who divorce, equivalent household income fell sharply from \$36,200 pre-divorce to \$27,900 at the first interview after divorce. It then increased steadily

Journal of Social Issues 180; A Sørensen, 'Estimating the economic consequences of separation and divorce: a cautionary tale from the United States' in Lenore J Weitzman and Mavis Maclean (eds), *Economic Consequences of Divorce: The International Perspective* (Clarendon Press, 1992) 263; Ruth E Weston, 'Changes in Household Income Circumstances' in Peter McDonald (ed), *Settling Up: Property and Income Distribution on Divorce in Australia* (Prentice-Hall of Australia, 1986) 100.

51 Australian Council of Social Service, above n 48, 32. For discussion of the Report see Adam Gartrell, "'Our national shame": 730,000 Aussie kids living in poverty', *The Age* (Melbourne), 15 October 2016.

52 Australian Council of Social Service, above n 48, 19 (footnote omitted).

53 Ibid 22.

54 Ibid 23.

55 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2024.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Australia Revealed, 2016* (26 June 2017) <<http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2024.0>>.

56 Laurie Brown, 'Divorce: For richer, for poorer' (Income and Wealth Report No 39, AMP, National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling ('NATSEM'), December 2016) 5. AIFS data suggests around 75 per cent: Qu et al, above n 8.

57 de Vaus et al, above n 7, 26.

to be \$41,300 after 6 years (an increase of 14 per cent over the 7-year period). While this represents a recovery in real income after a short-term post-divorce decline, these women fell behind their married counterparts who did not divorce (who had an increase in real income of 19 per cent). For men who divorced, equivalent household income increased in the year after divorce and grew by 29 per cent over the 7-year period, a much faster rate of growth than that experienced by couples who remained together (whose income increased by 18 per cent in real terms over this period).⁵⁸

De Vaus and colleagues found that the negative impact of divorce on women's income was significantly exacerbated when women lived with dependent children. They found that for these women the initial drop in equivalised household income post-separation was 'substantially larger' and that while their position improved over time (for reasons including their increased paid employment post-separation, repartnering, and receipt of government benefits) 'the recovery in income is much slower and the gap in income 6 years after separation is still substantially greater than it was pre-separation'.⁵⁹ While this research suggests (in contrast to recent analysis in the UK context by Hayley Fisher and Hamish Low)⁶⁰ that women's increased workforce participation after divorce has an impact in alleviating financial disadvantage, it also finds (consistent with Fisher and Low)⁶¹ that significant disparity continues.⁶²

The finding that women and children bear the brunt of economic disadvantage post-separation was once again confirmed in Australia in 2016, in the 'Divorce: For richer, for poorer' AMP and National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling ('NATSEM') income and wealth report ('NATSEM Report'), which looked at the financial impact of divorce using economic modelling of longitudinal data collected during 2001–14.⁶³ The NATSEM Report found, in relation to divorces involving couples with no dependent children under 16 living with them, that '[o]verall, divorced women are worse off than both divorced men, and married women',⁶⁴ on the basis of analysis of income, home ownership, household asset, debt, and superannuation data. In contrast, the Report found that '[d]ivorce has little impact on the employment status and income of men [without dependent children] aged 25–64 years'.⁶⁵ The Report further found that the negative financial consequences of divorce are 'most marked for mothers'⁶⁶ with consequent negative flow-on effects for children:

Nearly half of all divorces each year involve children. Divorced mothers experience financial hardship more than couple families or families headed by a father who has been divorced. And with 97 per cent of divorced households headed by divorced

58 Ibid 32–4 (footnote omitted).

59 Ibid 34.

60 Fisher and Low, 'Recovery from Divorce', above n 49.

61 Ibid.

62 See also above n 49.

63 Brown, above n 56.

64 Ibid 6.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid 24.

mothers in Australia, Divorce: For richer, for poorer shows divorce has a negative impact on the financial wellbeing of children of divorced families.⁶⁷

While there is very little research on the extent to which property settlements can reduce women's economic disadvantage after separation, research on the positive impact of the payment of child support in reducing economic disadvantage of mothers and children suggests this would be so.⁶⁸

Of course, women's economic disadvantage relative to men does not solely result from relationship separation: it is a function of a range of systemic factors, including the ongoing gender pay gap between men and women in Australia (hitting a record high of 18.8 per cent in February 2015),⁶⁹ which is then reflected in men's much higher superannuation savings compared to women's (especially mothers') superannuation savings,⁷⁰ both of which are in turn reflective of direct and indirect discrimination, stereotypes about what men and women 'should' do, and ongoing social and cultural expectation that women will tailor their workplace participation around their domestic, childcare and other informal care commitments.⁷¹ Nevertheless, as these systemic disadvantages operate to the benefit of the community — and in particular to the significant economic benefit of men as a group⁷² — it follows that they are disadvantages which should be more equitably shared between men and women, including on relationship breakdown.

All of this suggests the wisdom of legislative amendment that de-emphasises the current contributions-based focus and addresses the economic disadvantage faced by women and children. However, as the next section makes clear, our lack of current empirical knowledge regarding the relevance and impact of the current legislation to family law property settlements, along with research underlining the significant role of non-legislative matters in influencing property settlement, makes the position considerably more complicated.

⁶⁷ Ibid 25.

⁶⁸ Christine Skinner, Kay Cook and Sarah Sinclair, 'The potential of child support to reduce lone mother poverty: comparing population survey data in Australia and the UK' (2017) 25 *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 79.

⁶⁹ Sarah Sedghi, 'Gender pay gap hits record high, prompting calls for Government action', *ABC News* (Melbourne), 27 February 2015.

⁷⁰ David Hetherington and Warwick Smith, *Not So Super, For Women: Superannuation and Women's Retirement Outcomes* (Per Capita Australia Ltd, Australian Services Union, 2017): the superannuation system is systematically biased against half the population. Women are simply not being assisted by super towards a reasonable standard of living in retirement. Women's superannuation balances at retirement are 47% lower than men's. As a result, women are far more likely to experience poverty in retirement in their old age. Superannuation is failing women: at 6.

Similar patterns have been identified in England and Wales (Hilary Woodward with Mark Sefton, *Pensions on Divorce: An Empirical Study* (Cardiff University, 2014) 5).

⁷¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, What is the Gender Pay Gap? (24 July 2018) <www.wgea.gov.au/addressing-pay-equity/what-gender-pay-gap>.

⁷² See, eg, Deloitte Access Economics, 'The economic value of informal care in Australia in 2015' (Report, Carers Australia, 2015).

B Property division outcomes in the broader separating population

The research on property division in the broader separating population — and particularly recent research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies ('AIFS') — suggests an absence of clear or discernible patterns in, and reasons for, the way property is divided after separation, yet also a majority perception that outcomes are 'fair'.

There is no requirement in Australia to obtain court orders for property (or parenting). By far, the majority of property division on separation occurs outside the formal adjudication context.⁷³ Recent AIFS research conducted by Lixia Qu and colleagues, involving telephone interviews conducted with 10 000 separating parents, found that the majority described 'discussions' as their main pathway for resolving property issues (39.5 per cent), with a further 18.6 per cent responding that there had been 'no specific [process]'.⁷⁴ The researchers found that lawyers were described by a significant minority of respondents as their main pathway for resolving property issues (29.1 per cent), but very few described courts as their main pathway (7.2 per cent).⁷⁵ Private settlement was thus the norm, although with greater use of formal pathways (especially lawyers) as the value of the parties' property increased, or where there were only liabilities. Reasons for these patterns include that property pools are usually low or modest,⁷⁶ and a paucity of legal aid or other free or inexpensive legal advice for financial disputes.⁷⁷ Taxation relief on transfer of assets available to separating couples who formalise their property settlements means that consent orders are often sought and made,⁷⁸ which partly explains the use of lawyers by a significant minority in this context.

In relation to outcomes Qu and her colleagues found that:

On average, based on both fathers' and mothers' reports, mothers received 57% of assets and fathers received 43%. The most common division reported was a share for the mother of between 40% and 59% (one-third), and about a quarter of parents reported a higher share for the mother of between 60 and 79%.⁷⁹

While this suggests a general pattern of mothers receiving the majority share of property, closer analysis indicated a more complex story, due to differential reporting between mothers and fathers: 'On average, fathers estimated 65%

⁷³ Fehlberg et al, *Australian Family Law*, above n 1, 476–9.

⁷⁴ Qu et al, above n 8, 98 Table 6.9.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid 93, 92 Table 6.1: Qu and colleagues found that among their sample, 19.6 per cent had no assets, 1.3 per cent had only debts, 18.5 per cent had assets of less than AUD\$40 000, and 10 per cent had assets of more than AUD\$500 000.

⁷⁷ Belinda Fehlberg et al, 'Post-Separation Parenting and Financial Settlements: Exploring Changes Over Time' (2013) 27 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 359. See also Productivity Commission, above n 43.

⁷⁸ Parties who wish to avoid state tax (stamp duty) on transfer of real property, and federal tax (capital gains tax) on the transfer of certain assets (in essence, investments) need to obtain court orders or enter a binding financial agreement. See further Fehlberg et al, *Australian Family Law*, above n 1, 483.

⁷⁹ Qu et al, above n 8, xvii.

going to the mother, compared with mothers' estimates of 49%.⁸⁰ There was thus no clear indication that mothers were receiving a major share of what was usually modest property, at the end of relationships averaging 10 years' duration, during and following which mothers were usually majority time parents (across all three waves — parent interviews were conducted in 2008–09 and 2012 — around 75 per cent of children were in the care of their mother for the majority of nights or all nights per year; that is, 66–100 per cent of nights).⁸¹ Similarly, longitudinal qualitative research by Fehlberg and colleagues conducted between 2009–11 found no clear link between parenting arrangements and property settlement, although 'as a group, mothers in our sample fared worse than fathers in relation to share of property received relative to their level of care of children'.⁸²

This is unsurprising given that the current legislation does not prioritise the needs of children and their carers. Perhaps, then, legislative reform to encourage this may be a good idea. However, the position is complicated by the fact that Australian empirical studies have consistently found that a range of factors not referred to in the legislation influence property settlements on relationship separation,⁸³ and that this is the case whether or not family law professionals and processes are accessed.⁸⁴ For example, Qu and colleagues noted that:

the evidence suggests the strongest influences on the proportionate share of property were: the size of asset pools, the dynamics surrounding the separation (who initiated separation, who left the house), a history of family violence/abuse and care-time arrangements. The influence of the effects of a history of family violence/abuse and the role played in the separation decision on the shares received by each [parent] were mediated by who left the house at separation. There was no association between property division and children's age.⁸⁵

The full range of factors that the research indicates are likely to impact on financial settlements are thus not reflected in the checklist of factors in s 79(4) or s 90SM(4), in particular: who left the family home, who initiated separation, being a target of family violence or abuse, and the quality of the post-separation relationship. It is also not clear whether the legislation is being used at all outside adjudicated cases, or whether the combined effect of broad discretion and the checklist of factors limit its utility.

As a result, the 'extent to which law does or does not influence the behaviour and actions of people who do not engage with the formal legal system and even those who do'⁸⁶ is at best variable and unclear,⁸⁷ notwithstanding continued heavy use in Australia of legislative amendment (at

80 Ibid 102.

81 Ibid 71 Table 5.1.

82 Fehlberg, Millward and Campo, above n 13, 230.

83 For England and Wales, see Emma Hitchings, Joanna Miles and Hilary Woodward, *Assembling the jigsaw puzzle: Understanding financial settlement on divorce* (University of Bristol, 2013).

84 See Fehlberg, Millward and Campo, above n 14, 229–36; Fehlberg et al, 'Post-Separation Parenting and Financial Settlements', above n 77, 397–401.

85 Qu et al, above n 8, 105. See also Fehlberg, 'Post-Separation Parenting and Financial Settlements', above n 77.

86 Matt Harvey, Maria Karras and Stephen Parker, *Negotiating by the Light of the Law: A report on the effect of law on the negotiation of disputes* (Themis Press, 2012) 4.

least in the parenting context) as a mechanism for attempting to influence the behaviour of separating parents outside the courts.⁸⁸ There is a distinct possibility that legislative reform will be misunderstood or ignored altogether. We return to this issue in Section V.

Qu and colleagues' research also explored the extent to which parents considered that their property division was fair, both at the time it was finalized and at the time of interview. They found that the majority considered the result was fair at both points, although significant minorities (especially fathers) thought it was unfair:

There were three main themes from parents' comments of unfairness: the perception that a fair outcome required an even split; inadequate consideration of the respondents' contributions during the relationship, with many comments suggesting values attaching greater weight to income-earning and financial contributions than homemaker contributions; and inadequate apportionment of liability debts and the inclusion of resources provided by the parents' own families (eg, their own parents or grandparents) in the asset pool. Other comments include the assertion that the system is biased against men (fathers' reports), and that it is unable to handle one party behaving dishonestly in disclosures relating to property and financial resources.⁸⁹

The themes identified in the above passage suggest a perception of a substantial minority — mainly fathers who reported receiving a minority share of the property — that financial contributions are given insufficient weight. The researchers observed that '[a]t a conceptual level, the responses reinforce ... that fairness is an inherently subjective concept. It was evident that a range of issues, including personal values and expectations of the relationship, influenced perceptions of unfairness.'⁹⁰

In summary, research on property outcomes in the broader separating population suggests that most separating parents consider that 'fair' results are being achieved, but that outcomes do not clearly provide for a greater share to mothers — even though they are the usual primary carers of children before and after separation — over fathers. Yet fathers are nevertheless more likely than mothers to think outcomes are unfair. Importantly, this pattern is consistent with previous research finding 'that divorced men were more likely than divorced women to say they were poor or very poor. This is despite the fact that divorced men had higher incomes than divorced women and were less likely to experience financial hardships',⁹¹ and conversely, women's greater satisfaction with their post-separation financial circumstances despite

87 Eg, Ira Ellman, 'Why Making Family Law Is Hard' (2003) 35 *Arizona State Law Journal* 699; John Eekelaar, 'Uncovering Social Obligations: Family Law and the Responsible Citizen' in Mavis Maclean (ed), *Making Law for Families* (Hart Publishing, 2000) 9; John Dewar, 'Can the centre hold?: Reflections on two decades of family law reform in Australia' (2010) 24 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 139; Rae Kaspiew et al, 'Legislative aspirations and social realities: empirical reflections on Australia's 2006 family law reform' (2011) 33 *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 397.

88 See, eg, *FLA* ss 65DAC, 65DAE, which direct parents regarding consultation in relation to major long-term issues and other issues.

89 Qu et al, above n 8, xvii.

90 *Ibid* 112.

91 AIFS, 'The long-lasting financial impacts of divorce for women' (Media Release, 8 July 2009).

their greater poverty.⁹² It is a pattern that should warn us of the dangers of accepting subjective claims of economic disadvantage at face value when considering reform. It is also possible that encouragement of shared parenting (see Section V) has fueled formal equality discourse, including a perception that equal division of property is ‘fair’ — a point we return to in Section III (C). Finally and unsurprisingly, previous research also confirms that a range of factors not referred to in the legislation will be relevant when property is divided (a reality not confined to family property law, or indeed to family law). Overall, the research suggests the challenges of — but need for — legislation that focuses our attention on post-separation economic disadvantage of women and their dependent children as an issue fundamental to our definition of ‘just and equitable’ outcomes.

C The impact of family lawyers

There is very little recent research to inform our understanding of how s 79 or s 90SM is being interpreted and applied by family lawyers. The main research — that of John Wade,⁹³ and Rosemary Hunter and colleagues⁹⁴ — was conducted, respectively, in the early 2000s and late 1990s, well before a number of significant family law changes in Australia, including the 2006 shared parenting amendments (the relevance of which are discussed in the next paragraph), the inclusion of de facto financial disputes in the *FLA* from 1 March 2009, and superannuation (or pension) splitting reform from 2002 (allowing splitting at the accumulation (pre-retirement) phase).⁹⁵ In summary, this research is consistent with that involving the broader separating population, in that it suggests outcomes do not substantively favour mothers (as the usual primary carers of children before and after separation) over fathers, along with the relevance when dividing property of a range of factors not referred to in the *FLA*.

More recently, an online survey of family lawyers conducted as part of the AIFS Evaluation of the 2006 shared parenting amendments⁹⁶ suggested that post-amendment there has been a reduction in the share of property received by mothers. About half of the 319 family lawyers surveyed in 2008 said that property settlements had changed in favour of fathers and that the average property division allocated to mothers had decreased by about 7 per cent (from 63 per cent to 57 per cent) post-2006.⁹⁷ This appears to represent a shift away from the position that had developed from the mid-1990s, when more significant adjustments on the basis of the additional factors (that is, factors relating to the parties’ respective financial futures: Section II) began to be

92 Smyth and Weston, above n 9, 14–17.

93 John Wade, ‘Arbitral decision-making in family property disputes — lotteries, crystal balls, and wild guesses’ (2003) 17 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 224; Rosemary Hunter et al, *Legal Services in Family Law* (Law Foundation (NSW), 2000).

94 Hunter et al, above n 93, 162.

95 Although the research suggests that women’s property settlements have not increased as a result of this change: Grania Sheehan, April Chrzanowski and John Dewar, ‘Superannuation and Divorce in Australia: An evaluation of post-reform practice and settlement outcomes’ (2008) 22 *International Journal of Law Policy and the Family* 206.

96 Rae Kaspiw et al, ‘Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms’ (Evaluation Report, AIFS, December 2009) 225.

97 *Ibid.*

made.⁹⁸ It was not unusual to see adjustments of around 10–15 per cent in favour of mothers with children living with them, on the basis of care of children of the marriage along with reduced income earning capacity due to parenting and homemaker responsibilities during marriage, in combination with their enhancement of the husband's economic position, which sometimes allowed the mother and children to stay in the family home. The researchers suggested several reasons for this apparent change, including that bargaining dynamics/trade-offs may have been affected by the shared parenting amendments (for example, mothers trading away property to resist shared time claims by fathers) and that shared time arrangements reduced the likelihood and extent of adjustments to take account of the parties' different economic positions. These findings have so far not been accompanied by any systematic empirical analysis of reported cases or court files to determine whether lawyers' observations are in fact being played out in reality. The reports of lawyers are certainly concerning, given the empirical evidence discussed in Section III (A) regarding the economic disadvantage of women and children.

D Property division outcomes in adjudicated cases

There is limited recent empirical research analysing property cases decided by family law courts, either pursuant to consent orders or adjudication. As a result, we have little sense of how the legislation is being applied by courts.

Previous research conducted in 2004–05 by Helen Rhoades and colleagues on adjudicated property outcomes suggested that a settled approach existed in standard cases that accorded with a 'norm' involving modest assets accumulated over the course of a relationship of reasonable duration due to the joint efforts of the parties.⁹⁹ Rhoades found that within the Family Court of Australia, property division was approached differently in cases involving assets of modest value compared with cases involving high assets. Her analysis of 60 unreported Family Court judgments found that the detailed examination of the parties' contributions that occurred in high asset cases rarely occurred outside that context. Rather, the approach of judges in cases involving modest assets was usually to treat the contributions of spouses as 'roughly equal' and to focus on the needs of the spouses and their dependent children. Rhoades further found that 'judges regularly abandoned the requirement to consider the parties' contributions in favour of a needs-based approach where there were limited assets and dependent children to house'.¹⁰⁰ However, these findings were based on research conducted before the 2006 shared parenting amendments, before *de facto* financial disputes were brought within the *FLA* in 2009, and well before *Stanford*.¹⁰¹ More recently, Christopher Turnbull conducted an exploratory quantitative analysis of 200 first-instance property settlement determinations made between July 2012 (so before the High Court's decision in *Stanford*, on 15 November 2012) and

⁹⁸ Eg, *Waters v Jurek* (1995) 20 Fam LR 190 (Fogarty J).

⁹⁹ Helen Rhoades, 'Equality, Needs and Bad Behaviour: The "Other" Decision-Making Approaches in Australian Matrimonial Property Cases' (2005) 19 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 194.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid* 194.

¹⁰¹ *Stanford v Stanford* (2012) 247 CLR 108.

June 2015. The cases analysed represented an estimated 7 per cent of financial judgments over that time, were mainly decisions of the Federal Circuit Court, and were all cases where there were children of the marriage or de facto relationship. While acknowledging variations in decision-making processes, Turnbull found that '[t]he overall mean result was 54% to mothers and 46% to fathers.'¹⁰² He also found that while s 75(2) adjustments were mainly in favour of mothers, adjustments over 20 per cent occurred in fewer than 10 per cent of cases.¹⁰³ As Turnbull also acknowledges, there is still much we do not know (including in relation to consent order, binding financial agreement and longitudinal outcomes) and a need for statistically representative research.¹⁰⁴

In summary, our analysis in Section III suggests that there is considerable diversity in — and much we do not know about — property division outcomes across the broader separating community, including among those who receive legal assistance, and in adjudicated cases. This is consistent with John Dewar's observation that the Australian family law system is:

a system polarised by pathways, by the dispositions of parties to agreement, by associated disparities of bargaining power, and disparities in access to legal advice and processes. The fundamental features of horizontalisation and the relative autonomy of multiple sites of interpretation are intensified in ways that seem to have more diverse results — positively in some cases, but negatively in others.¹⁰⁵

Diverse outcomes are precisely what we would expect in a 'horizontalised' system (that is, one in which people have available to them a variety of family law processes to resolve the issues arising on relationship breakdown) and in the context of a discretionary legislative framework (no two families are the same). However, it is concerning that the interests of women and children appear to be attracting, if anything, decreasing attention in the context of the disproportionate poverty rates for women and children in Australia and the particularly adverse economic consequences of separation and divorce for them (Section III (A)).

IV Reform of the s 79(4) factors — Substantive considerations

Our analysis so far suggests the need for further empirical research to inform our understanding of how the broad discretion under s 79 or s 90SM is being interpreted and applied, particularly by lawyers and courts, and that a wide range of factors extending well beyond the s 79(4) or s 90SM checklist influence both property outcomes and the socio-economic context in which they occur.

Given these challenges, we would argue that any proposal for legislative amendment should be approached with caution in the absence of a solid research base. What *is* clear, however, is the research evidence regarding

¹⁰² Christopher Turnbull, 'Family Law Property Settlements: An Exploratory Qualitative analysis' (2018) 7 *Family Law Review* 215, 228.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* 229.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* 230.

¹⁰⁵ Dewar, above n 87, 147.

women's and children's economic disadvantage post-separation. On this basis, our view is that, if legislative reform were to be considered, it should aim to address this disadvantage. Therefore our preferred approach, drawing on English approaches and proposals,¹⁰⁶ would first address the reasonable housing needs of children, followed by the material and economic security of the parties, followed by compensation for relationship-generated losses and finally, equal division of any residue, unless exceptional circumstances are established. We would favour preserving a broad and nuanced discretion, but providing guidance regarding key principles underpinning the exercise of that discretion, with these principles being based on what we know to be the significantly economically disadvantaged position of women and their dependent children. This approach offers the best way of encouraging 'just and equitable' outcomes as conceptualised by us throughout this article.

In arriving at this conclusion, we have gained particular assistance from English developments following the House of Lords ruling in 2000 in *White v White*¹⁰⁷ and *Miller v Miller; McFarlane v McFarlane*,¹⁰⁸ as well as subsequent work of Joanna Miles¹⁰⁹ and in broader terms that of Alison Diduck.¹¹⁰ Drawing together these elements, Rob George¹¹¹ suggests that it is important that the parties' needs are calculated first, followed by taking into account any compensable losses (that go beyond need) and only then calculating if there is any surplus and if so, dividing this equally.¹¹² In our view this approach has considerable merit and provides a workable basis for the development of Australian family law jurisprudence on the substantive content of our own 'just and equitable' requirement.

In terms of suggesting a specific reform proposal suited to the Australian context, we are influenced, first, by the fact that while Australia has a well-established (and much reviewed) child support program, child support, 'was never intended to meet the housing needs of children, only day to day expenses'.¹¹³ The problematic absence of any focus in Australian family property law on the housing needs of children has been rightly emphasised by Parkinson,¹¹⁴ and the case for amending the *FLA* property provisions to provide for special treatment of the family home has also been strongly made

106 Rob George, *Ideas and Debates in Family Law* (Hart Publishing, 2012); Joanna Miles, 'Principle or Pragmatism in Ancillary Relief: The Virtues of Flirting with Academic Theories and Other Jurisdictions' (2005) 19 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 242; Joanna Miles, 'Charman v Charman [No 4] — making sense of need, compensation and equal sharing after Miller/McFarlane' (2008) 20 *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 378; Alison Diduck, 'What is Family Law For?' (2011) 64 *Current Legal Problems* 287; Law Commission (England and Wales), *Matrimonial Property, Needs and Agreements* (Law Com No 343, 2014).

107 [2001] 1 AC 596.

108 [2006] UKHL 24, 2 AC 618 ('Miller; McFarlane').

109 Miles, 'Principle or Pragmatism in Ancillary Relief', above n 106; Miles, 'Charman v Charman [No 4]', above n 106.

110 Diduck, above n 106.

111 George, above n 106.

112 Ibid 95–102.

113 Parkinson, 'Unfinished business', above n 40, 5.

114 Ibid.

in the past.¹¹⁵ Similar to the position in England and Wales, we envisage that the requirement to first address children's reasonable housing needs would not direct decision-makers toward a specific outcome, but would rather encourage courts to consider what orders would facilitate the provision of appropriate housing for children, with a focus on the home in which children spend most time.¹¹⁶ While it is arguable that our proposed approach may increase the risk of parents seeking time with their children in order to maximise their financial outcomes, this risk has been present in Australia since major Child Support amendment in 2008 reducing payers' child support once they spend 14 per cent of nights with their children.

Our suggested next priority is the attainment of material and economic security of the parties. We are drawn to the possibility of addressing material and economic security more broadly (that is, 'needs' or disadvantage that exists including that arising from circumstances not directly connected with the relationship) on the basis that this is consistent with our view that systemic disadvantage should be more equitably shared (Section III (A)), and the reality that other forms of advantage or disadvantage not arising from the relationship (for example, good health and illness) may well be a matter of good or bad luck, so should also be shared on relationship breakdown to the extent to which it is just and equitable to do so.¹¹⁷ Here, we agree with Diduck's view that 'family law is about determining responsibility for responsibility'.¹¹⁸ We share Diduck's concern with caring responsibilities within families, and with what value is placed 'on those compromises and on that care work, and who is responsible for paying for them'. We agree with her conclusion that '[u]ltimately, answering those questions is what ... family law is for.'¹¹⁹

We acknowledge, however, that the notion that a person is 'responsible' for the economic security of their ex-partner is perhaps controversial in the sense that it may be at odds with the limited sense of financial obligation to ex-partners that research suggests exists in the broader community¹²⁰ and to some extent in legal discourse as evidenced by the low incidence of spousal and de facto partner maintenance in Australia,¹²¹ and in recent consideration in England and Wales of 'the proposal that needs should embody incentives towards independence',¹²² while also recognising that 'in a significant number

115 Tom Altobelli, 'Submission to the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group' in Tom Altobelli (ed), *Family Law in Australia: Principles & Practice* (LexisNexis Butterworths, 2003) 525.

116 *M v B (Ancillary Proceedings: Lump Sum)* [1998] 1 FCR 213; Family Justice Council, 'Sorting Out Finances on Divorce' (Guide, April 2016). We are mindful of the possibility that this might lead to a minority of parents attempting to 'game' the system (by seeking to maximise the amount of time that a child spends with them) in order to get a larger share of the property. Research suggests that financial motives are already relevant for parents working out property settlement and child support (eg, Fehlberg, Millward and Campo, above n 14), so this is an issue which professionals and courts will continue to grapple with.

117 On the issue of the extent to which it may be just and equitable to do so, see the discussion in Miles, 'Responsibility in Family Finance and Property Law', above n 12, 106–7.

118 Diduck, above n 106, 292.

119 *Ibid* 314. Like Diduck, we take the view that this concern applies to parties with and without children.

120 *Ibid*.

121 Juliet Behrens and Bruce Smyth, 'Spousal support in Australia: A study of incidence and attitudes' (Working Paper No 16, AIFS, 1999).

122 Law Commission (England and Wales), above n 106, 38 [3.47].

of cases independence is not possible'.¹²³ In this context we note recent English work directed at more closely defining the concept of 'need', suggesting that even when principles appear simple, their interpretation and application may present considerable challenges in practice.¹²⁴ We also note Miles' analysis underlining that 'responsibility' does not simply exist along the single axis of partner to partner but is shared along *three* axes: individual ('local'), partner ('horizontal') and state ('vertical') and that '[t]he key task is to determine the appropriate distribution of responsibility between these three'.¹²⁵

While the issue of allocating responsibility for the material and economic security of the parties clearly requires further discussion and analysis, as a tentative initial suggestion we would expect that addressing the material and economic security of the parties within the property provisions of the *FLA* would in most cases focus on housing and income (with current research on the minimum income to live a healthy life providing a *minimum* starting point),¹²⁶ informed by what is reasonable given the available property.¹²⁷ We would also anticipate that in many cases, provision of appropriate housing for children and addressing the material and economic security of the parties would absorb and indeed exceed the property available for division. Spousal or de facto partner maintenance would remain an option if, after property division, a party is unable to support herself adequately and the other party has the capacity to pay,¹²⁸ although here we would agree with Parkinson that 'there is merit in the idea that spousal [and now de facto partner] maintenance should be dealt with according to just one set of principles'¹²⁹ (as articulated in Section V).

In addition to dealing with economic disadvantage, our preferred approach would also extend, as Miles has explored in the context of England and Wales, to 'an element of compensation, as distinct from need, to the extent that the relevant losses exceed the applicant's needs'¹³⁰ and the property available for division allows. In addition, in cases involving family violence, courts should 'be empowered to award compensation for pain and suffering and economic loss as a result of a history of family violence during the marriage [or de facto relationship]'.¹³¹ More generally, given the complexities in calculating

123 Ibid 42 [3.67].

124 Family Justice Council, 'Guidance on "Financial Needs" on Divorce' (Guide, June 2016); Family Justice Council, 'Sorting Out Finances on Divorce', above n 116.

125 Miles, 'Responsibility in Family Finance and Property Law', above n 12, 92.

126 Peter Saunders and Megan Bedford, 'New Minimum Income for Healthy Living Budget Standards for Low-Paid and Unemployed Australians' (Report, Social Policy Research Centre, August 2017). See also [2016] (2) *Poverty Lines: Australia*.

127 Family Justice Council, 'Sorting Out Finances on Divorce', above n 116.

128 *FLA* s 72(1) or s 90SF(1).

129 Parkinson, 'Unfinished business', above n 40, 6.

130 Miles, '*Charman v Charman [No 4]*', above n 106, 389.

131 Parkinson, 'Unfinished business', above n 40, 4–5. Currently, family violence is treated as a matter that can result in the contribution of the victim being accorded additional weight (*Kennon v Kennon* (1997) 22 Fam LR 1) but the formulation is difficult to satisfy and adjustments are minor at best: Patricia Easta, Catherine Warden and Lisa Young, 'The *Kennon* "factor": Issues of indeterminacy and floodgates' (2014) 28 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 1; Easta, Young and Carline, above n 10. In our view, there is merit in the

compensation,¹³² we would like to see further consideration of possible models for taking into account the effects of role division within marriage and de facto relationships in property settlements, perhaps with the general objective of assisting the economically dependent party to recover in the short-to-medium term although not limited to this, depending on what the justice and equity of the case requires.¹³³ Once again, spousal or de facto partner maintenance would remain an option if the available property was insufficient to meet the claim.¹³⁴

The final step in our approach would involve equal division of any remaining property, unless there was good reason to do otherwise. This approach is consistent with the ‘partnership’ approach commonly adopted during relationships: previous research over many years tells us that during marriage, and following the arrival of children in de facto relationships, financial pooling is likely.¹³⁵ This, however, raises questions regarding the position of couples without children. More generally, there is a need for new research in this area, as much of the research on financial sharing in marriage was conducted in the early 1990s. Equal sharing also is admittedly at odds with the subjective perception of individual entitlement that is likely to occur or increase after couples separate. In our view, however, a law promoting ‘just and equitable’ property outcomes should, once dependent children’s housing needs and material and economic security of the parties and compensation issues are addressed, as a general principle support the more positive pattern of financial sharing commonly adopted (on the basis of available evidence) during relationships, while allowing for departure from this position in exceptional circumstances. Given the broad definition of ‘property’ for the purposes of the *FLA* (Section II), departure would be likely to be argued, for example, in cases involving short-term relationships without children where assets had been acquired pre or post relationship.

Section 79(4) or s 90SM(4) as drafted does not overtly encourage our preferred approach, due to its primary focus on contributions. While the High

view that compensation for family violence in the family property division context should reflect an amount that would be awarded as damages in a civil suit for assault: Parkinson, ‘Unfinished business’, above n 40, 6.

132 Miles, ‘*Charman v Charman [No 4]*’, above n 106.

133 See, eg, Kate Funder’s work in the 1980s at the AIFS. Funder and her colleagues put forward a model for calculating the opportunity costs for mothers, in contrast with women of the same age and educational attainment with no children, proposing that this cost be shared between the parents. Funder acknowledged the difficulty of making such calculations (including the problem of working out what might have been the woman’s workforce trajectory if had she not had children): Margaret Harrison, Kathleen Funder and Peter McDonald, ‘Principles, Practice and Problems in Property and Income Transfers’ in Kathleen Funder, Margaret Harrison and Ruth Weston (eds), *Settling Down: Pathways of Parents after Divorce* (Monograph No 13, AIFS, December 1993) 192, 204–9. This problem leads Parkinson to suggest that ‘it is better to give the courts a broad discretion to compensate for a “serious” economic disadvantage as a result of the circumstances’ (Parkinson, ‘Unfinished business’, above n 40, 8) — an understandable conclusion, but one which does not really progress us from the current position.

134 Here, consideration might be given to models developed for courts to assist in the achievement of more predictable and consistent outcomes, eg, the Canadian ‘Spousal Support Advisory Guidelines’.

135 For a summary of the literature, see Fehlberg et al, *Australian Family Law*, above n 1, 393–7.

Court has made clear that the Full Court may develop non-binding guidelines for lower family law courts,¹³⁶ the approach we suggest involves significant change to the order and content of the current list of factors in s 70(4) or s 90SM(4), requiring legislative reform, particularly given that after *Stanford* the Full Court seems (understandably) less likely than ever to provide such guidance.

The question then becomes: what form should that legislation take?

V What *form* might guidance take?

As regards the form of the approach we envisage, we are influenced by the reality that to be effective Australian family law must speak to ‘multiple fora’ and to multiple actors.¹³⁷ As our preceding discussion makes clear, the *FLA* property provisions may be applied and interpreted by a range of actors in a range of contexts, predominantly *outside* the formal adjudication system. As we would prefer that the legislative reform we propose was utilised to a greater extent by legal actors and separating spouses and de facto partners in the negotiation of property outcomes, the guidance we envisage needs to be readily intelligible.

At present, it is abundantly clear that Australian family law is far from achieving that goal. Across the board, the shift has been toward more, and more complex, legislation since the 1990s in the areas of parenting, child support and financial matters. As Dewar has argued, ‘[f]amily law presents primarily a regulatory rather than an adjudicative task, in the sense that it provides guidance mostly to lay people in the practical resolution of issues or disputes’, but:

this fact is not recognised in the way we write family laws ... current law in Australia is so complex that many lawyers struggle to make sense of it. The law that non-lawyers, acting in informal settings to resolve disputes, *think* they are applying, to family law issues may bear only a tangential relationship to what the law actually is.¹³⁸

Thus while Dewar acknowledges that factors outside of the legislation influence outcomes, he also suggests that the form of legislation will influence the extent to which it is understood and the extent to which it is applied.¹³⁹

More recently, in its 2014 report on *Access to Justice Arrangements*, the Productivity Commission noted that:

¹³⁶ *Norbis v Norbis* [1986] 161 CLR 513.

¹³⁷ Dewar, above n 87, 147–8 (note that while Dewar makes observations in relation to family law generally, his focus in this article is on parenting law rather than family property law).

¹³⁸ *Ibid* 148.

¹³⁹ A similar observation to that of Dewar regarding the limited role of law is reached by Matt Harvey and colleagues, who studied the effects of discretion in laws on the negotiation of disputes governed by those laws (Harvey, Karras and Parker, above n 86, 2). They concluded that ‘[i]t is clear that many factors other than norm form play a part in determining the outcome of negotiations’ (Harvey, Karras and Parker, above n 86, 71) including financial calculation, emotion, and the extent to which the facts and the law give power to the negotiators. They further concluded that ‘[i]f anything, [their study tended] to support the conclusion that factors *other* than the governing law can be more significant in enabling resolution of disputes’ (Harvey, Karras and Parker, above n 86, 73). However, despite their reservations, Harvey and colleagues in the end concluded that, ‘Decision-makers would clearly benefit from an unambiguous statement of the goal to be achieved when the

Given that very few family law disputes are resolved through the courts, there is value in ensuring that those seeking to resolve disputes outside the courts have a reasonable degree of clarity about what the law is and what their entitlements are. However, there is a question as to whether the current *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) provisions applying to the division of property limit the effective use of informal dispute resolution mechanisms by making it difficult for parties to know what their obligations or entitlements in a property division are.¹⁴⁰

The Report suggested that this might be due to the ‘complexity of the Act’s property provisions’ and the ‘discretionary approach’ giving judges ‘wide powers’.¹⁴¹ The Report recommended that the property provisions be reviewed ‘with a view to clarifying how property will be distributed on separation’ and suggests the review should consider introducing a presumption of equal sharing.¹⁴²

While we appreciate the possible advantages of such an approach (namely, its simplicity, and its capacity to possibly improve the bargaining position of particularly vulnerable parties, including victims of family violence, who might otherwise settle for less than half), it is an option that concerns us, given our analysis in Section III. In our view, research on the economic consequences of relationship separation suggests such a significant level of disparity between men and women that an equal sharing model would in most cases produce outcomes that are far from ‘just and equitable’ for women and children. We are concerned that this form of simplicity would come at the risk of producing further injustice, given that the significant economic disadvantage of women and children may well point to women’s receipt of property exceeding a half share. Indeed, if mothers are currently receiving on average just over half of the property, based on the broadest reading of the available empirical evidence discussed in Sections III (B) and (D), legislating for a starting point of equal sharing would represent a conscious choice to worsen outcomes for them. A starting point of equal contributions would be likely to have the same effect, as (based on Australia’s shared parenting amendment experience, considered later in this section) the simple meaning drawn from the principle would likely be that the law directs equal sharing of property.

The importance of some form of simplification becomes apparent, however, when we have regard to what the research tells us about the *form* of legislation that is *most likely to be understood and applied by various actors*. Of relevance here is recent research in the context of English civil procedure rules by Inbar Levy.¹⁴³ Drawing on a behavioural psychology perspective, Levy concludes that a preferable approach to the checklist or ‘laundry list’ approach¹⁴⁴ (which leads to ‘factor overload’ — that is, the ability to identify relevant factors but the inability to weigh them up in a systematic way) would

discretion is exercised. With such a clearly stated purpose, preferably with examples, coherent guidelines for the discretion’s exercise can evolve’ (Harvey, Karras and Parker, above n 86, 10).

140 Productivity Commission, above n 43, 873.

141 Ibid 874.

142 Ibid.

143 Inbar Levy, ‘Lightening the overload of CPR Rule 3.9’ (2013) 32 *Civil Justice Quarterly* 139.

144 Also seen in *FLA* s 79(4) or s 90SM(4).

be to provide a small number of considerations (up to four) and to make clear the overriding goal or principle. Levy's research does not necessarily point to a preference for a more formulaic, as opposed to discretionary, approach. Rather, it is 'factor overload' generated by the 'laundry list' of too many factors and the lack of a clear overriding principle that are problematic, and that make it difficult to predict what a court will decide, and arguably difficult to negotiate a private settlement as a result.

In the s 79 or s 90SM context, the existing overriding goal or principle is the 'just and equitable' requirement.¹⁴⁵ In our view, and following the implications of Levy's research, affording courts a discretion to reallocate property interests under this guiding principle is desirable and should be maintained. It is arguable, however, that the long list of factors in s 79(4) or s 90SM may well contribute to 'factor overload'. Given that the emphasis and ordering of the s 79(4) or s 90SM factors sit, in our view, rather incongruously with the concept of 'just and equitable' as we have articulated it in this article (on the basis of available empirical data), we consider that any reform proposal is better targeted at both reducing the number of factors and prioritising them so that the material and economic security of parties and their children is better addressed, while also retaining a broad discretion regarding the application of those factors in individual cases to achieve contextually 'just and equitable' outcomes.

Great care, however, needs to be taken with any reform proposal. The challenge is to address the goal of simplicity while also achieving outcomes that are substantively just and equitable. Australian family law reform has generally failed in this regard. In essence, formal equality discourse has consistently trumped substantive equality considerations.¹⁴⁶ The 2006 Australian shared parenting amendments provide a case in point. The amendments included the introduction of a presumption of equal shared parental *responsibility* along with provisions regarding protection of children from family violence and abuse. Research conducted after the amendments found that complex legislation had led to a common misunderstanding that shared parental responsibility allows for 'equal' shared care time,¹⁴⁷ and that shared parenting messages were outweighing messages regarding children's safety. This led to further amendment in 2012 to improve the family law system's identification and responses to family violence.¹⁴⁸ Most recently, however, an AIFS evaluation of the amendments suggested that, 'courts remained concerned to ensure that, wherever possible, children's relationships with both parents were maintained after separation, except in cases where the evidence was unambiguously in favour of an outcome inconsistent with this approach'.¹⁴⁹ Family law professionals participating in the study were generally of the view that less 'adequate priority' was placed on 'protection

145 Ibid s 79(2) or s 90SM(3).

146 Fehlberg, Sarmas and Morgan, above n 8.

147 Rae Kaspiew et al, 'Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms' (Summary Report, AIFS, December 2009) 24 (emphasis added); Richard Chisholm, 'Family Courts Violence Review' (Report, Family Court of Australia, 27 November 2009).

148 *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011* (Cth).

149 See further Rae Kaspiew et al, 'Evaluation of the 2012 family violence amendments' (Synthesis Report, AIFS, 2015) xi.

from harm' than on 'meaningful relationship'.¹⁵⁰ Australia's experience of legislating in the shared parenting domain conveys that several factors are crucial to the achievement of outcomes that are in line with legislative intent, including: the form of law, cultural attitudes within the family law system¹⁵¹ and the broader community, and adequate resourcing of the family law system so that well-informed decisions are made.¹⁵² Added to this is Australia's experience with child support reform: constantly reformed¹⁵³ and increasingly rule-based, to the cost of women and their dependent children.¹⁵⁴

In the property context, further lessons may be learned from the Scottish approach to financial orders, which is based on five principles, the first being fairness. A recent review of the legislation found that, despite the presence of five principles, the default position is equal sharing, and this was the result in most of the adjudicated cases.¹⁵⁵ An understandable tendency to distil a simple message¹⁵⁶ seems evident here. While lawyers interviewed for the study considered that the five principles worked well in providing guidance as well as flexibility, it was clear from the study vignette that practice approaches varied, and unclear how varying practices affected both the application of the principles and substantive outcomes — although under-use of key principles relevant to economic disadvantage was evident.

In summary, then, the available evidence supports the view that if legislative reform were to occur, decision-makers, family law professionals and the broader separating population would be most assisted by a simplified approach that articulates up to four principles to guide determination of what property outcome would be 'just and equitable'. To this end, and following on from the discussion of substantive considerations in Section IV, we would suggest, as a basis for further discussion, the following amendment to s 79(4) or s 90SM(4):

- (4) In determining what order (if any) is just and equitable in property settlement proceedings the court shall consider the following principles, in the order of priority listed below:
- (a) the reasonable housing requirements of any dependent child of the parties;
 - (b) the material and economic security of each of the parties;
 - (c) whether an adjustment should be made in favour of one of the parties by way of compensation for relationship-generated loss;

150 Ibid xii.

151 Rosemary Hunter, *Women's Experience in Court: The Implementation of Feminist Law Reforms in Civil Proceedings Concerning Domestic Violence* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 2005).

152 Penny Timms, 'Legal Aid Matters: Lack of government funding "destroying lives", Law Council says', *ABC News* (Melbourne), 14 May 2016.

153 See the references cited at above n 18.

154 Bruce Smyth and Paul Henman, 'The distributional and financial impacts of the new Australian Child Support Scheme: A "before and day-after reform" comparison of assessed liability' (2010) 16 *Journal of Family Studies* 5.

155 Jane Mair, Enid Mordaunt and Fran Wasoff, *Built to Last: The Family Law (Scotland) Act 1985 — 30 years of financial provision on divorce* (University of Glasgow, 2016); Jane Mair, 'The Family Law (Scotland) Act 1985: A principled system in context' (2018) 32 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 204.

156 Ellman, above n 87.

- (d) equal division of any surplus remaining after consideration of (a), (b) and (c), in the absence of exceptional circumstances.

We would emphasise that this approach is a proposed order of priority for applying the ‘just and equitable’ requirement in a way that addresses more closely the position of those most economically disadvantaged post-separation, rather than an approach dictating particular outcomes in individual cases. Much more work would need to be done to determine the application of these principles in particular contexts often referred to in commentary, including short relationships, relationships without children, economic disadvantage not directly arising from the relationship (for example, illness), and the relevance of fault. For reasons outlined earlier in this section, our preference is for appellate courts (the High Court and the Full Court), broadly consistent with the concept of precedent within the common law tradition, to provide this guidance.

VI Conclusion

Achieving consensus on the meaning of ‘just and equitable’ and on the appropriate guidance to be provided in s 79 or s 90SM in Australian family property law is likely to prove difficult, if not impossible in the current social and legal context of family law in Australia, in which debate continues to be polarised along gender lines. The history — and indeed the form — of the Australian shared parenting amendments illustrate this tension, promoting both shared parenting outcomes and protection from harm in a manner that reflected the competing claims of fathers’ groups and groups concerned to protect women and children from family violence.¹⁵⁷ In the property context, any departure from the predominantly ‘contributions focussed’ model which currently exists would be likely to meet significant opposition.

Difficulty and opposition should not, however, inhibit the putting forward of reform proposals that are more likely to achieve just and equitable outcomes and that are intelligible and relevant to the range of actors in family law. In this spirit — and on the basis of current empirical evidence — we have suggested an approach that prioritises children’s housing needs, followed by the material and economic security of parties, followed by compensating for losses and *lastly*, equal division of any surplus in the absence of exceptional circumstances.

Yet we would also emphasise that introducing further legislative guidance may not of itself lead to more just and equitable outcomes without encouragement of social and cultural change supporting the principles implemented — a factor that is also of key relevance to judicial interpretation of law.¹⁵⁸ In the end, the key issue surrounds achieving greater consensus on

¹⁵⁷ Chisholm, above n 147.

¹⁵⁸ See, eg, Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1992): interpreters are not constrained by the ‘text’ but also are not free to read into the text whatever they like, as they are constrained by their tacit awareness of what is possible and not possible to do. The source of this tacit awareness is the relevant interpretive community — in the case of judges, primarily the legal, but also the broader, community, whom they seek to persuade that they have decided the case

what family property law is for.¹⁵⁹ In this regard, the ongoing — and apparently increasing — challenge is to achieve greater understanding and recognition of the economic consequences of separation and divorce for women and children in a social environment that prefers to believe that gender equality has been achieved, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

correctly. The constraint on interpretation is therefore the persuasiveness of any particular interpretation, in the first instance, to the legal interpretive community and then more broadly, to the community at large.

¹⁵⁹ Diduck, above n 106.