



Poverty and social exclusion among lone-parent households

Across Europe, there is evidence that household structures are changing and evolving. Everywhere, both families and labour markets underwent massive changes in their structural characteristics, albeit with different timings and, sometimes, for different reasons. Lone-parent households have to surmount important obstacles in order to have a foothold in the labour market and be able to earn income without becoming dependent on welfare payments. A disproportionate number face unemployment and the risk of poverty. The examination by the Commission of the national action plans on social inclusion submitted by the Member States since 2001 makes it clear that growing up in a poor family, particularly in a family with three or more children or a lone-parent family, has been identified by many Member States as one of the main risk factors associated with poverty and social exclusion. Poverty and social exclusion among lone-parent households, if not countered, may have long-term effects because of the risk of transmission of poverty between generations: poor children are likely to become poor and socially excluded adults.

The importance of this issue led to the commissioning of a study on poverty and social exclusion among lone parents. The study aimed to:

- *analyse the reasons why lone-parent households experience higher poverty risks,*
- *analyse the barriers they have to face in order to access employment and other means of social inclusion analyses reviews,*
- *examine how Member States have tried to address the problem, especially by taking lone parents off welfare dependency and offering them job opportunities,*
- *identify and disseminate best practice among the policy measures that were examined.*

This study compared and contrasted policy approaches and outcomes in thirteen countries: Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

General theoretical background

The second part of the 20th century witnessed marked changes in the socio-economic characteristics of western European societies. Everywhere, both families and labour markets underwent massive changes in their structural characteristics, albeit with different timings and, sometimes, for different reasons. The post-war European welfare states were adapted to a

family model and labour market structures which no longer hold. The stable, homogenous male breadwinner family model of the mid-century compromise societies (if ever fully realized), was replaced by a more pluralistic and diversified set of family forms. At the same time, the stable, typical, blue-collar, low-skilled and male jobs of the Fordist societies were replaced by more insecure, flexible, high-skilled and differentiated jobs, accessed by a growing proportion of married mothers.



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Indeed, in contemporary societies people marry less and at a later stage of their lives, divorces and breaks of cohabitation are more frequent than before, families without any member in the labour market increase, out-of-wedlock births are increasing too, even if overall fertility is decreasing. These changes have led to a marked increase in the proportion of lone-parent families, a worsening of their economic condition and a significant change in the composition of this group: marital breakdown replaces widowhood as the main cause of lone parenthood, closely followed by single motherhood and the disruption of cohabitations. Of course, not only were the levels from which this transformation started very different across countries, but also the strength and timing of the transformation has been very different – generally following a north-south gradient, with the Eastern European countries being somehow a mix of the two.

The demographics of lone parenthood in thirteen European Countries

A first step in the study consisted in exploring the dimension of lone parenthood in thirteen countries¹ in 2006, as an outcome of this complex and diversifying process of change, asking to what extent the composition of lone-parent family groups (according to the gender of the lone parent and the civil status of the lone mother) is different in different countries.

If we consider the number of lone-parent families with dependent children as a proportion of all families with dependent children (i.e. less than 18 years old) we can clearly distinguish at least two different groups of countries:

- that of the Southern European countries (Italy, Spain and Portugal) in which the level is quite low (less than 12%) and
- that made up by Denmark, the Anglo-Saxon liberal countries (United Kingdom and Ireland, as concerns welfare regime) and some transition countries (Slovenia, Germany and Bulgaria) in which the proportion of lone-parent households is around 19% or higher.

The continental countries Poland and Norway come in-between in one way or another.

If, instead, we consider more specifically the composition of the group of lone-parent families, four groups of countries may be distinguished:

- The Mediterranean countries,² even though the largest part of the group is by now made up by divorced mothers, still a significant number of lone parents are in fact widows (between 15 and 34%), whereas the proportion of unmarried single mothers is quite low (lower than 13% in Italy and Spain and only in Portugal up to 22%);
- The Continental countries, where the proportion of divorced mothers is the highest (52% or higher), the quota of unmarried single mothers is between 28 and 32% and that of widows is quite low. This second group comprises France, Germany and the Netherlands;
- Poland and Slovenia lie somewhere in-between these two first groups: they still have quite a large proportion of widows, as in the first group, but the quota of unmarried single mothers is much higher than in Italy and Spain. The case of Bulgaria can be

¹ i.e.: Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

² Portugal does represent somehow a special case of the type of Mediterranean countries, whereas the most consistent results are found for Italy and Spain (and would be very similar in Greece, which was not included in the sample).

associated with this third group, given that the only data available over-represent the widows and under-represent the single mothers;

- Germany, Denmark, Norway, Ireland and the United Kingdom – where the proportion of unmarried single mothers reaches its highest levels (i.e. between 37 and 52%³), whereas the number of widows reaches its lowest levels.

The age of divorced mothers is quite similar to that of married mothers, whereas widowed mothers and lone fathers (among whom, presumably, there is quite a large quota of widowers) are older and unmarried lone mothers are younger than married mothers. However, some national variations in this common pattern prove quite interesting. In particular,

- Very young mothers (i.e. less than 25 years) represent quite a high proportion of unmarried lone mothers in the United Kingdom (36%), Poland (34%), Ireland (28%), Germany (24%), Norway and Portugal (20%);
- In some transition, Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries we found a small but not insignificant proportion of very young lone fathers (i.e. under 25 years), a group virtually absent in other countries: 7% in Germany, 4% in Bulgaria, Ireland and Norway, 2% in the United Kingdom. A similar pattern also emerges when considering the quota of lone fathers younger than 35 years: 25% in Denmark, between 19 and 22% in Poland and Germany, 17% in the United Kingdom.

The social exclusion of lone parents

Lone-parent families combine a number of factors which are strongly related to new emerging risks of poverty and social exclusion in our societies. The study was able to reach an acceptable level of geographical coverage and data comparability on five different indicators of social exclusion: educational level, labour market participation, income poverty, low-income risk, and housing entitlement.

Educational level

The educational disadvantage of lone-parent families varies quite remarkably depending on the route into lone parenthood. Thus widows are at a much higher risk than married mothers of having low educational levels but this negative effect is much attenuated when controlling for age. On the contrary, the educational disadvantage of divorced mothers is increased when considering age composition: indeed, where divorce is a more “democratic” phenomenon (like in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ireland) divorced lone mothers are much more likely than married mothers to have only the first levels of education or to quit the educational system before getting a university degree. The picture changes dramatically in countries with increasing incidence of teenage single motherhood (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Bulgaria and Poland) where unmarried mothers are at a quite high risk of getting much lower educational attainments than married mothers of the same age.

³ Even if this latter figure for Ireland depends on the particularly low threshold of age of the children.

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This type of relation between early parenthood, union breakdown and low education seems also to be emerging for the group of “new” lone fathers.

Where the composition of the group of lone fathers seems to be beginning to change (from old widowers to young divorced and unmarried single fathers)⁴ the percentages of low educated are similarly increasing. Thus, for example, in Ireland, Norway and Germany the risks for this group of having only a primary school certificate are between two to eight times that of married mothers.

Labour market participation

In the case of widowed mothers, even if they happen to have an higher unemployment rate than that of married mothers in a few countries (i.e. Ireland, the United Kingdom and Italy), it seems that the early recognition and coverage of the risks connected with the death of one spouse has led to a quite generous welfare provision and, also, to their deactivation on the labour market.

In the case of divorced mothers, their lower educational level, in comparison with married mothers, has generally resulted in a much higher risk of unemployment. This is less so in Italy and Spain where divorce is still much more frequent in the higher social classes and is not associated with educational disadvantage. There are two important exceptions to this common pattern: Norway and the United Kingdom, where both the individualization of social rights and a generous provision for lone parents lead to quite a considerable deactivation effect in relative terms.

As for single unmarried mothers, while it is true that they have the highest unemployment rate in the pop-

ulation, it is also true that their activity rate is often much higher than that of married mothers, the only exceptions to this pattern being Norway, the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The situation of lone fathers varies across Europe: in the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Netherlands the unemployment rate among lone fathers is higher than that of married mothers. The opposite is true in Norway and in the Mediterranean countries. Where new types of lone fathers are emerging, this group of the population is increasingly facing the same problems as lone mothers and only in the United Kingdom and Ireland is the activity rate of lone fathers lower than that of married mothers.

Income poverty and low-income risk

Despite their much worse educational attainment and their deactivation on the paid labour market, widows fare much better than other lone parents and these disadvantages do not result in higher poverty risks. This is less so for the Mediterranean countries than for the Netherlands and Norway, irrespective of the fact that widows' pensions seem more generous in the former countries.

Single mothers are almost everywhere in the most disadvantaged position – except in the Netherlands,⁵ where the existence is well known of a numerous group of mature and “by choice” unmarried mothers. Poverty risks associated with this type of lone parenthood are particularly strong where its diffusion is the lowest: i.e. Southern Europe except Spain. Divorced mothers are also in quite a bad situation, being generally closer to that of unmarried mothers than that of widows.

⁴ In some cases, however, the numbers are very small in our sample.

⁵ And in Denmark, probably, but we have no comparable data to document it.

This is particularly striking in Southern Europe where we noted that they are usually quite well educated women.

As for lone fathers, in Southern Europe, where the group is made up mainly of older men, with a job and not so poorly educated, lone fathers are less than (Spain and Portugal) or as much as (Italy) at risk of income poverty as couples are. On the contrary, where the composition of the group is changing, they are becoming much more at risk, their problems being more similar to those of divorced and unmarried mothers than those of widows.

Housing

A further indicator of the economic deprivation faced by lone-parent families is their over-representation in the group of families which privately rent (at market costs) the house where they live. Available data⁶ show that everywhere in Europe lone parents are over-represented among tenants, the only exception being lone fathers in Spain and widows in Ireland. Of course, in almost all our countries they also have easier access to public and free rent housing, but these housing policies effectively offset only a small part of the economic disadvantage of lone parents. The only countries in which public housing policies had some significant impact on lone parents' conditions are those in which there is traditionally a strong housing policy (which originally was not conceived specifically for lone parents, but which gave priority to them), i.e. the United Kingdom (although this privilege has been recently abolished) and Ireland. To some extent also in Germany and Portugal an important quota of lone parents have access to public housing, while in the other countries the percentage is lower than 15%.

The evolution of the welfare states in view of the emergency of lone parenthood

National welfare systems are exposed nowadays to a totally different set of requirements than in past decades. While in the past the “Old Social Risks” such as unemployment, illness, disability and old age dependency were covered for virtually all members of society, thanks to the correspondence between social security entitlement criteria and the prevalent family form, the “New Social Risks” such as low-paid and non-quality jobs, single-earner families, long-term unemployment of low-skilled workers, difficulty for women and young people to enter the labour market, unemployment affecting more and more adult people of working age that have emerged let more and more particular social groups out of any umbrella at particular stages in life. At the same time, under the increasing pressure of financial sustainability, old and new risks have both to be covered.

On the basis of the study's original data collection (flash reports and vignettes), each single country of the sample and the five main families of welfare regimes we distinguished earlier⁷ were classified along a continuum of a good-to-insufficient recasting of the welfare state in order to cover New Social Risks. This mainly involves family policies, active labour-market policies, support for lifelong learning and re-training, socialization of care work, care services, support of the cost of children and conciliation policies.

⁶ We have comparable data by subtypes of lone parents for the United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway, Italy, Spain and, partly for Denmark and Poland.

⁷ 1. Scandinavian countries and France, 2. Liberal Anglo-Saxon countries and Netherlands, 3. Germany, 4. Transition countries, 5. Mediterranean countries and Bulgaria.

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Thus it emerges that widows' pensions and orphans' allowances have been reduced or abolished and substituted or accompanied by measures explicitly addressing lone parents – coming from every route into lone parenthood – and their children. This redesign of social policies is always eased by the emergence of the issue in public debate, both in the case of an increased perception of lone parents as a social threat (Anglo-Saxon countries) and in the case of closer consideration of their problems and risks of social exclusion. In this way the fragmentation of the new social risks can be to some extent overcome. One other element identified as crucial is the emerging awareness as to the fact that every child lacking one of the parents living with him/her faces the same risks as an orphan, irrespective of whether the other parent is still alive, and this child should enjoy the same rights to social support. A third element relates to the fact that the consequences of separation, divorce, abandonment, are no longer conceived as private individual risks but are taken out of the private sphere and granted protection by society.

Conclusions

Policies in favour of lone-parent families can by no means be mandatory and standardized for all countries. In fact, it should not be forgotten that the development has taken place historically in a number of separate stages that are specific to the country, on the basis of choices that remain political and where the shortage of resources is the ever present backdrop.

For example, it would be misplaced to hope that those countries of Southern Europe that still fail to "see" lone parents as a unitary category should be able to make the direct leap to the mature stage of the countries of the North, which have learnt – after decades of consolidated, generous, targeted family policies – to avoid any sort of categorization that might entail some stigma.

When it comes to possible and effective transitions between policy areas in each country (from income support to activation policies, from family policy to income support, etc.), it is the dependency path that matters. The welfare-to-work approach was born in countries with low participation of lone mothers in the labour market and specific family solidarity models. It does not make much sense to propose a hard workfare approach to countries with a completely different history of family obligations and very dissimilar causes of impoverishment. In the Mediterranean countries, for instance, lone-parent families already work in a much higher proportion compared to the activity rates of women. The transition countries have similar problems, but perhaps different priorities. Making access to the labour market easier for the breadwinners of lone-parent families – either women or men – should not be by coercion or blackmail, but it should, above all, improve the quality of the work they could access. The problem of being trapped in bad-quality jobs is a very real circumstance for lone mothers and, at the same time, let us stress, for the absent fathers of the children.

There are also lessons following a different spirit in line with the Open Method of Coordination on social protection and social inclusion that have already been spread to countries with older and more generous family policies: the toning down of the workfare system (already to be seen in Liberal Anglo-Saxon countries); the “make work pay” principle, i.e. making it more cost-effective for inactive people to start working; and, at the same time, softening the transition from work - to - non - work periods and from one area of support measures to another. These lessons can no longer be neglected even in countries which have more urgent problems such as setting up a sensible architecture for family welfare, which, from its very inception, would address the new risks associated with the pluralization of family forms. In countries with weaker or non-existent family policies, lone parents already have access to jobs, but mainly to poorly paid and unsatisfactory ones; the problem is to favour access to jobs allowing better articulation between work and family, and a better quality of life for their children.

But while a lone-parent-family policy begins with targeted and specific measures, it will then mature only if included in a broader, multifaceted framework of family support policies. The introduction of specific measures (or more favourable conditions) for lone-parent families should always be supported by a consistent framework of measures for all parents. And this transformation towards universalistic measures responds in a more flexible way to the new demographic and social risks brought about by the transformation of the family's life cycle, insofar as it better supports the transitions between phases and does not favour any particular family type.

Another important element relates to the need of setting up uniform ways to manage advance maintenance for divorced and single mothers of recognized and unrecognized children whose fathers can not be depended on to pay alimony (for example an agency not as a means for recovering public money but as an alternative to courts for settling disagreements between the lone parent and the absent parent). This type of arrangement is of paramount importance in countries still lacking minimum income schemes, and the effectiveness of the measure lies in fact in the recognition of a social risk deserving protection when many absent parents are unable to pay back the maintenance advanced by the authorities. But also, at a less ambitious level, an agency of this kind could play at least a symbolic role in reducing litigation between former spouses or natural parents and prepare the way for convergence towards shared post-divorce custody on the part of parents, a practice now quite normal in some European countries but perhaps beyond the reach of countries still lacking appropriate cultural background and family support policy. This is particularly important for catching up on the lag of countries where the effect on child poverty and the effect of inter-generational transmission of social exclusion are notably underrated, while the duration of spells of lone parenthood can hold greater hazards than the numerical occurrences of the problem. Such a measure is a good proxy of the maturity of a welfare regime, but it can also be rightly considered as an authentic European social policy measure since it has been already developed spontaneously in many countries under different welfare regimes.

Further information

A copy of the full report can be found on the European Commission website Social Protection-Social Inclusion:

http://ec.europa.eu/comm/employment_social/social_inclusion/studies_en.htm

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