SPAN
Single Parent Action Network

The State and single parent families

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About Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)
Single Parent Action Network is a diverse organisation working to empower one parent families throughout the UK. SPAN envisages a society that values the vital contribution of one parent families and enables them to participate fully in all areas of life.

Introduction

Single parent families are now a common family form across European countries, according to the European Community Household Panel, the most reliable source of data; in 1996 there were 4.3 million lone parent households in the EU-15. What is more, the numbers of single parent families continue to rise across all European countries, including those in Southern Europe[1]. By 2001, Sweden had taken first place with lone parents making up 22% of all households with dependent children, followed by the UK with 17%[i].

Yet single parents continue to face a very high poverty risk. Across the EU-15 in 1996, their standard of living was 23% below that of all households with children, and 27% below that of the whole population[ii].

This higher risk is associated with a number of factors. Single parents tend to have lower employment rates across the European Union.[iii] SPAN participatory research with 68 single parents found that the single-handed juggling of employment with caring responsibilities makes it difficult for single parents to access and sustain good jobs[iv]. This is confirmed by a number of other studies.[v] There are divisions in the labour market with low-paid, insecure, part-time jobs for those less skilled and with caring responsibilities.

Nevertheless, if we compare the poverty risk of single parents across countries we find remarkable differences. In 2006 Bradshaw compared the most reliable evidence on child poverty across EU countries. Not only did he find that rates vary significantly, but he also found that they do not depend on the prevalence of single parent families. Thus in 2003 Sweden had the highest number of children living in lone parent families and the lowest child poverty rate across 27 EU countries, whilst the UK had the second highest number *and* one of the highest poverty levels.

Why is this? Single parents are a diverse group and countries with a high risk of poverty have higher numbers of never-married and younger single parents, who tend to have low education levels and skills and low employment rates[vi]. But this is by no means the whole story. The risk of poverty faced by single parent families is also dependent on the type of welfare state, i.e. on the kind, level and mix of policies that impact on single parents, *and* on their objectives.

In this paper I adopt a feminist perspective to show that different states hold very different ideas about family and gender relations. These notions result in different policies, which have very different impacts on single parent families.

Welfare models

There is a vast feminist literature on welfare state development. From this I have drawn 4 different welfare models for analysing the impact of policies on single parent families. I focus on alimony policies and parental care in particular.

[1] Providing that we count those that live with their extended families.

The breadwinner model[vii] This model is based on the notion of the nuclear two parent family where the wife is a full-time mother and the husband is the breadwinner. Germany, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands were clear examples of the strong male breadwinner model until the late 1990s. In these countries single parents tended to be seen as a problem because they lacked a breadwinner. They tended to be treated as full-time parents and were protected through alimony and social assistance measures which did not require them to look for work, and therefore recognised their parental care work. Because of poor childcare provision and lack of support for employment, lone parents' poverty risk was dependent on the value placed on their parental care. For example, if we compare the cases of the UK and the Netherlands, we can see an important difference. Social assistance in the former is very low, whilst being very generous in the latter. In the UK, single parents' poverty risk is much higher and linked to a low social assistance benefit that does not reward parental care sufficiently.

The risk of poverty also depends on the aim of the alimony policy. The Child Support Act of 1991 was underpinned by traditional notions of gender relations, which saw the reinforcement of biological fathers' responsibility to pay maintenance to their ex-partners as a key route to reducing benefit expenditure, as most lone mothers at the time were relying on Income Support (IS). Mothers who refused to name the father of their children were to have their benefits cut by 40%, unless they could prove that there was a significant risk to their children's welfare. Yet because maintenance was fully counted for means-testing of social assistance, they and their children did not gain anything extra from receiving this maintenance[viii]. This policy was very unpopular amongst lone parents and their ex-partners, and the agency was never successful at achieving fathers' compliance. Only 1/3 of single parents were receiving regular maintenance in 2002[ix]. Until recently in the UK, single mothers' poverty risk was very high which linked to the fact that they were treated as full-time parents but not rewarded for their parental care work, and made dependant on low state benefits and unreliable alimony.

The extended family model[x] This model characterises Southern European Countries and is underpinned by a notion of extended family, whose members have legal obligations to support dependent adult children and relatives for life. The extended family is the main safety net and policies assume that resources are shared across the generations. The lack of the breadwinner in this respect is not a problem, and therefore single parents are not an issue for policy makers; single parents' needs remain invisible to them[xi]. There is no guaranteed social assistance or alimony. Rates of employment are high amongst single parents, many of whom tend to be older and have good human capital. Those who have low human capital rely on their extended family for income and childcare. Their poverty is hidden by statistics that measure poverty at the household level[xii].

The parent-worker model[xiii] This is an ideal model which has never existed in its pure form. The Scandinavian countries have come closest to it. The main assumptions underpinning this model are that families are diverse and that adults should be supported as parents *and* workers. Parents are supported as workers through the provision of good quality childcare and employment opportunities. This model values parental care through the provision of generous parental leave policies. The family in Sweden, whether composed of 2 parents or 1 parent, is entitled to 480 days parental

leave, 390 of which are paid at 80% of earnings, which can be taken any time until the child is 8. There is also a right to unpaid leave until the child is 18. 120 days of temporary parental leave can be taken per year when a child is sick, 60 of which if childcare is broken down. Again this is paid at 80% of earnings. Almost all families[2] use this leave in Sweden, the majority taking it until the child is 2 after which affordable childcare is extensively available.[xiv] In addition, single parents are entitled to advanced alimony. This means that single parents have a very low risk of poverty, and of stigmatisation. Yet those that wish to be full-time mothers can feel very stigmatised through lacking this choice[xv]. Social assistance benefits are short and conditioned on job seeking.

The adult worker model[xvi] The main assumption of this model is that all capable adults should be in employment independent of the type of family they live in. This model has been taking hold since the late 1990s and is now becoming prevalent across Anglo-Saxon countries and northern European countries. It is also underpinning European Union family policies[xvii]. Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, previously strong male breadwinner models, have witnessed the most dramatic shift in this respect.

I now take the example of the UK to illustrate how this change has radically transformed social assistance and alimony policy, and to some extent the policies that reward parental care. I then examine the impact of this shift on single parent families' poverty.

The adult worker model and implications for single parent families' poverty: the case of the UK

In 1998, one year after New Labour came into government, Tony Blair made an historic pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020, which signalled a very welcome change in the political and policy climate. By then the UK had the worst record of child poverty in Europe. Strategies to eradicate child poverty have been influenced by the shift from a strong male breadwinner to an adult working model.

Social Assistance

The primary poverty eradication strategy is the reduction of 'joblessness'[3] amongst single parents, and more recently partners of the unemployed, i.e. mothers in couples whose partner is not in work. The main measures developed have been employment programs and very recently the reform of social assistance. The principle underlying the reform is more personalised support in exchange for stricter benefit conditions.[xviii] Most claimants, including single parents, are to be moved to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), and required to either seek work or undertake work-related activities, depending on the age of their child[4].

Parental care

[2] 90% of fathers of children born in 1998 took parental leave. It must be noted that there are only 10 days of paid paternity leave designed for the time of birth, and there is no maternity leave.

[3] The actual term used by Government is 'worklessness' but here we use the term joblessness because this captures the fact that when a lone parent has no paid job s/he still does care work, albeit unpaid.

[4] Single parents whose youngest child is aged over 7 will be required to seek work. Those whose youngest child is between 3-6 years are to engage in work related activities, i.e. activities that will help them deal with their barriers to employment, lack of skills, health or housing issues, lack of qualifications, low self-confidence etc.

The radical reform to social assistance informed by the adult worker model has removed single parents' right to care full-time for their children. Yet JSA regulations have been modified to safeguard single parents' caring responsibilities[xix]. Single parents are not expected to take up a job unless they can find suitable childcare, and are entitled to seek work for 16 hours a week even if there is not much demand for part-time work in the area.

The minimum wage and tax credits have been introduced to *make work pay* and generally support parents with the costs of raising children. These measures enable single parents to combine part-time work with parental care, implicitly recognising and rewarding their caring responsibilities. For example, parents are entitled to working tax credit if they work at least 16 hours per week, whereas others have to work at least 30 hours. Working tax credit also includes a childcare element paying up to 80% of childcare costs. A portable Child Tax Credit has been introduced alongside the longstanding universal Child Benefit. Those who rely on social assistance are entitled to the maximum amount of Child Tax Credits, and when they move into work the entitlement continues but the amount is reduced according to how much they earn.

Childcare and work-life balance provision has also been extended. In 1998 the Government launched a National Childcare Strategy, a significant development given that no previous government had ever embraced the challenge of expanding day care. Capacity has since doubled but is still not enough. Also, children living in single parent and jobless households have benefited less from this expansion[xx]. Childcare is marketised and amongst the most expensive in the world. Often, single parents working part-time and qualifying for the childcare tax credit cannot afford to pay the remaining 20%. Key gaps are in provision of childcare for children over 11, with 1 place for every 200 children[xxi], and for evening and weekend provision. There is a high offer for part-time out-of-hours jobs.

It has also been assumed that this expansion is enough to enable single parents to combine employment with parental care. But formal childcare, no matter how flexible, can never fully replace the need for parental childcare[xxii]. Children's needs are complex and embedded in intimate relationships; children get sick. The reform of leave policies in 2006 has mostly focused on maternity leave. Parental leave is unpaid and very inflexible. There is no specific leave for when the children are sick. Parents with children up to 16 can request to work flexibly, i.e. part-time, reduced hours, job share etc, but the employer can still refuse this.

Alimony policy

Very recently the alimony policy has been reformed significantly in line with the reduction of joblessness and making work pay strategies. Its main objective is not to reinforce the father's responsibility, but to eradicate child poverty and support single parents' move into employment. Single parents are not required to pass on their details to the Child Support Agency anymore, whose role now is to focus on those situations where voluntary arrangements are not possible. From April next year single parents on social assistance can keep all of the alimony paid by the absent parent.

Conclusion: Implications for single parents' poverty, stigma, and right to time to care for their children

What has been the impact of this policy shift on single parent families?

In terms of poverty eradication there has been an improvement. Single parents' employment rate has certainly risen, from 40% in the early 1980s to currently 56.6%. But the risk of poverty for single parents working part-time is still very high - 27% in 2001[xxiii]. Sutherland (2002) found that the average gain on the minimum wage was £34.03 a week, which is not much at all considering that lone parents who use formal childcare have to pay at least 20% towards its very high cost. The current reform of JSA also risks increasing hardship amongst single parent families. There is some evidence[xxiv] to indicate that those most vulnerable are more likely to be sanctioned for not complying with job seeking or work related requirements, and to endure those sanctions, because of challenging home situations and lack of understanding about benefit requirements.

This model of enabling single parents to combine part-time work with parental care is not enough to enable them to sustain employment. Once in employment single parents are twice as likely to go back on welfare[xxv] and therefore experience poverty again. We have no conclusive evidence as to why this is, but clearly much part-time work is too low paid to be sustainable. Evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents has found that they tend to move into low-paid, low- skilled jobs[xxvi]. Achieving income security is also very hard because alimony is often irregular, and many single parents have experienced overpayment claw-backs of tax credits.

Single parents in employment experience time poverty. They find they have not enough time to dedicate to their children's education, and not enough quality time. Child centred research on children's social exclusion has shown that they highly value parental care. Parents' time poverty can impact negatively on their children, including social exclusion as they end up taking on domestic and childcare responsibilities, leading some to question the value of increased income as the result of their parents' employment[xxvii]. Policies that guarantee 'time to *care'* are key.

Last but not least, as Pascall[xxviii] has argued, the stigma for single parents has not gone away but has simply changed. Single parents will be tolerated if they work, but never praised for their parental care on equal standing to other types of families.

To conclude, we can see that this shift to the adult worker model has resulted in great transformations of social assistance, alimony and parental care policies. The same policy can look very different, and can have very different impacts in varying welfare contexts.

When advocating a policy to eradicate poverty for single parents, it is important to consider what impact the policy will also have on time poverty, stigma and autonomy from the absent parent and other family relations.

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