

COMMENT

Lone Parent Families: Politics and Economics*

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One of the central arguments in Jane Millar and Caroline Glendinning's article (*Journal of Social Policy*, July, 1989) is that in any analysis of poverty women cannot be 'added on', but rather, that the analytical structure must be rethought such that gender becomes an organising principle. It seems to me that this crucial point is further illustrated by the way in which the poverty of lone parent families has been conceptualised and addressed, the tendency being to categorise the poverty of these predominantly female-headed families separately. Given the idea that the normal family consists of two parents and is reliant primarily on the earnings of the man, women with children and without men become a problem category. The separate treatment of lone mother families thus follows inescapably from the assumption that adult women's maintenance is partner-dependent.

The treatment of lone parent families as a separate category has been justified in terms of need: yet as Jane Millar's (1987) figures show, 61 per cent of lone mother families are poor compared with 20 per cent of two parent families. Furthermore, the numbers of lone mothers on long term supplementary benefit have doubled during the 1980s. Indeed, it is the level of poverty among lone parent families together with a dramatic increase in their numbers from 570,000 in 1971 to 940,000 in 1984, that has made them a focus for intense debate.

Historically the modern state has experienced considerable difficulty in deciding whether to treat lone mothers as workers or mothers. In practice it has pursued first the one strategy and then the other. At the moment government concern to reduce dependency on the state seems likely to give policy a strong push in the direction of treating lone mothers as workers. Certainly, as long as policies focus narrowly on the behaviour expected of lone parents the options appear limited. But they will also be unrealistic. It is not possible to abstract the problems faced by lone parent families from those faced by two parent families, especially in regard to the efforts of any parent to combine paid work and family life.

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What is needed is a radical and much more sophisticated rethink, which focuses on the realities of women's lives, acknowledging the changes that have taken place in the sources of their financial support, and which seeks to make state maintenance policies dependent on women's paid and unpaid work status rather than on whether they have partners present. This in turn means looking at the provision of financial support and care for children and at employment policies for women.

In this country, the assumption that the primary duty of mothers is towards their children has been reflected in the post-war income maintenance system, with supplementary benefit provided until the child reaches 16 at the same level as for the disabled and aged. Perhaps not surprisingly, most lone mothers do stay at home. Their labour force participation rate is exceptionally low at 39 per cent, compared with 60 per cent in France, 67 per cent in the USA and 85 per cent in Sweden. Recent rumblings of a change in policy direction have been prompted in part by changes in the practices of many American states, where the pendulum has already swung firmly in favour of treating lone mothers as workers under the 'workfare' programmes.

Such an approach is not wholly unfamiliar. In this country, the late nineteenth century poor law was always uncertain in its treatment of lone mothers. It was not uncommon for widows, the most numerous group and perceived as the most deserving, to be told to work and support one to two children with some aid from outdoor relief, while the rest were taken into the workhouse. Such a compromise was not considered appropriate for other groups. Deserted wives were supposed to be denied any relief for a year to test their destitution and make sure that they were not colluding with their husbands to defraud the authorities. Unmarried mothers, condemned as morally reprehensible, were offered no relief for themselves or their children outside the workhouse. By the early part of this century the American example was attracting British attention, then because the pendulum had begun to swing in favour of treating lone mothers as mothers. Many US states had begun to pay 'mothers' pensions' before World War I. Widows pensions were not introduced in this country until 1925 and it was not until after World War II, during the heyday of Bowlbyism and the belief in the crucial importance of constant maternal care, that some consensus was achieved about the desirability of lone mothers staying at home.

Since World War II there has been considerable change in the circumstances of women described as lone mothers. The vast majority (64 per cent) are now divorcees rather than widows, and 23 per cent are never-married mothers. As in the nineteenth century, there is still a

tendency for both politicians and the public to regard widows as the most deserving group. The move towards treating lone mothers as workers in the USA has been fuelled by a strong sense of moral outrage at the idea that women, particularly young women, may increasingly be opting for unmarried motherhood and a 'welfare career'. Workfare programmes, which range from voluntary participation in training courses to compulsory requirements that recipients work in exchange for benefit, are at the centre of efforts to promote self-sufficiency among recipients of welfare. Their advocates believe that these programmes, together with moves to standardise and enforce child support payments from absent parents will provide a solution to a number of related problems: long term financial dependency on the state, rising public expenditure, and what has been labelled the increasing 'feminisation of poverty'.

The evidence to date is far from clear. Evaluation of the American experience seems to suggest that employment impacts and public expenditure savings are much harder to achieve in the case of welfare mothers with small children than in the case of unemployed men. Nor is it clear that women's material circumstances improve. Lone mothers usually find themselves in the lowest status of work which still pays considerably less to women than to men, and those in full time employment must still derive a significant proportion of their income from benefits. Finally, the undercurrent of hostility to the lone parent family, which has been a strong motivating force in American developments, means that workfare programmes tend to teeter between a desire to enable and a desire to punish. Without adequate social infrastructure—particularly in respect of child care services and parenting leaves—paid employment requires lone mothers to make a super-human effort, and the US record in these matters is considerably poorer than that of Britain, which in turn lags badly behind the rest of Europe. At worst, lone mothers may realise little by way of higher income and become increasingly 'time poor', with working time added to child care time.

At present in Britain it is not required that lone mothers take paid employment and the proportion of lone mothers in the labour market has actually been falling during the 1980s, while that of mothers in two parent families has been rising. Any expectation that all lone mothers should become full time paid workers has to take account of the fact that only 7 per cent of married women with children under school age are in the labour market and that 55 per cent of married women in employment work part time. On the other hand, it is not clear that these women 'choose' part time work; it is notable that less than half as many married

women in the USA work part time. The large proportion doing so in this country may well be constrained by the absence of child care services and parental leaves. Given that part time work is increasingly becoming the main (constrained) option for women with children, the choice of lone mothers is reduced still further, because currently, they cannot afford financially to opt for part-time employment. Acceptance of the right to a genuine choice of part time rather than full time work would involve a commitment to state support specifically for the lone parent to ensure an adequate income. At present, state benefit is deducted pound for pound of earnings above a tiny 'disregard', but until a more concerted attempt is made to tackle the major constraints on lone parents, especially mothers, taking paid work it would make sense to allow a greater proportion of benefit to be kept: there is no real choice about paid work if there is no financial gain from it.

Most policy developments in Britain, as in the USA, have treated lone parent families as a separate category. This results in one kind of behaviour being deemed appropriate for women in two parent families, and another for lone mothers which has been premised on a set of dichotomous choices (mothers or workers, dependency or independence) which are in turn inappropriately derived from male patterns of work. In the long term, a more imaginative approach is needed that recognises the ways in which adult women actually engage in paid and unpaid work over the lifecourse and that addresses the practical difficulties they experience. In some crucial respects a lead is provided by the approaches taken in other European countries.

1. Employment policies for women: the trend in adult women's employment, as Heather Joshi (1984) has shown, is towards continuous paid employment with minimal breaks for childbearing. But as Weale, Bradshaw, Maynard and Piachaud (1984) showed in their study of the effects of tapered earnings disregards on lone parents' labour market behaviour, lone parents experience overwhelming constraints in terms of lack of job opportunities, the availability of only low paid work and the difficulties of providing child care. Policies that address these three issues have contributed to the relative success of the Swedish example, where the focus is on the importance of labour market policies as a means to achieving social policy goals, with an explicit commitment to promoting gender equality. As well as a generous child support package, Sweden provides a one-year parental leave, 60 days a year sick leave for a parent who needs to stay at home with an ill child, and the right to work a six hour day until the child is eight. The result, as far as lone mothers are concerned, is that the vast majority of them are in jobs and comparatively few find themselves in poverty.

2. *Provision for young children:* special provision is required for children under school age, whether they are in one or two parent families, both with regard to their care and because their families are likely to be the poorest. Like many European countries, France has aimed to develop policies that will benefit all families with young children, comprising generous family and young child allowances and maternity grants. There is no reason why a component of payments in respect of dependent children of all ages should not come from the absent parent, collected by the state. Eekelaar and Maclean (1986) have shown that many absent fathers either do not pay when they could afford to, or could afford to pay more. But given the high rates of remarriage for men, it would be unrealistic to expect that all lone parent families could by law be reconstituted as, in effect, a two parent family under separate roofs. Finally, children involve costs in terms of care, costs which are greatest for pre-school age children. This care can be provided collectively or privately. Neither form of care is at present adequately recognised or supported. The former is inadequate in quantity and to a large extent in quality, and needs a huge injection of public funds. In the case of the latter, the parent would receive a childcare benefit. This has the advantage that it compensates the parent who chooses to stay at home. There is no necessary advantage in subsidising either the parent or the care so long as provision is well-regulated and of high quality.

3. *Provision for lone parents:* thus far in describing the sort of policies that would genuinely meet the needs of all women, no benefit has been attached to lone parents per se. This is unrealistic both in the case of the older divorced woman who abided by the customary work patterns of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, leaving the labour force either on marriage or on the birth of her first child, and in the case of the young, unmarried mother, who might have very little in the way of an employment record before the birth of her child. These women require some form of job training, which might also be available to women in two parent families, and special financial support, perhaps in the form of a transitional benefit of limited duration.

Greater sensitivity to the problems faced by lone parents over the lifecourse reveals the artificiality of treating the fundamental questions of employment and childcare in respect of one parent families separately from two parent families. The vast majority of lone parent families have, after all, been two parent families. The complex issues arising from the effort to combine paid and unpaid work affect all parents, especially mothers. Any attempt to engineer a switch such that lone mothers become dependent on the labour market rather than the state—workers

rather than mothers—is doomed to failure if these wider considerations are not addressed. Income maintenance policies affecting all adult women should hinge on their work status not on the presence of absence of a partner. But the concept of work must include unpaid work and policies must take a positive rather than a punitive approach to those parents seeking to secure a greater proportion of their income from wages.

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