



LUND UNIVERSITY

Single Mothers and the Dilemmas of Universal Social Policies

Stoltz, Pauline

Published in:
Journal of Social Policy

DOI:
[10.1017/S0047279497005114](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005114)

1997

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Stoltz, P. (1997). Single Mothers and the Dilemmas of Universal Social Policies. *Journal of Social Policy*, 26(4), 425-443. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005114>

Total number of authors:
1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Single Mothers and the Dilemmas of Universal Social Policies

PAULINE STOLTZ*

(Received 8.11.95; Accepted 3.1.96)

ABSTRACT

Danish social policies have a gender neutral approach, combined with an aim of autonomy for individuals and a system of universal social policies. This approach has moved Denmark away from the use of moral regulation of single mothers and a strong male income earner model in social policy. It has highlighted men's roles as fathers, as well as women's roles as workers and has therefore a lot of advantages. Problems do occur though when the obligation to work or to be a parent in reality differs for men and for women; this becomes clear when we focus on single parents.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of single mothers in Danish politics is not the same as that in England or in the United States. In the latter two countries single mothers have been regarded by their respective governments as constituting a social and moral 'problem'; this is reflected in the way this group is addressed within legislation in both countries (Lewis, 1993; Song, 1995; Jencks, 1992). In Denmark almost no attention has been paid to the role of single mothers as a distinct issue for social policies. In Danish legislation, single mothers are not distinguished from single parents in general. Concerning this issue, much has happened in Danish social legislation, as there are major differences between the agrarian-dominated

* Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University Centre, Aalborg, Denmark and Department of Political Science, University of Lund, Lund, Sweden.

This article is written on the basis of research carried out under the project 'Gender and European Welfare State Regimes' co-ordinated by Professor Jane Lewis of the London School of Economics and Political Science and commissioned by the Human Capital Mobility Programme of the European Commission. The author wishes to thank Birte Siim, from Aalborg University Centre in Aalborg, Denmark, who has been most inspirational to work with during the course of the research, as well as the participants of the project for their comments on an earlier version. For kind help with the English the author wishes to thank Utz McKnight. A longer version of this article is available as a working paper at the London School of Economics under the title 'Single Mothers in Denmark' (1995).

1930s, the male income earner/housewife period of the 1950s and the dual income earner household of today, when a single income earner is no longer in accordance with the social norm. The definition of the political issues for single mothers in Denmark is determined by the impact of gender neutral social legislation, including the role of fathers within this legislation.

The Danish welfare state can be described as building on a universal, or individual, concept of the welfare state system. One of the presumptions of this system is that a family consists of two adults, both of whom earn incomes. Single mothers do not fall within this normative concept. By highlighting the implications that this fact has for single mothers within Danish welfare provision, this paper will discuss women's dilemmas within universal social policies.

Concepts like autonomy, dependence and poverty have been used to describe the dilemmas for women in modern welfare states, but they mean different things in different contexts. Three key questions will be addressed in this paper. (1) What are the concepts of single mothers in Denmark, and how have these changed over time? Special attention will be given to the change made in Danish social policy from the concept of single mothers as primarily mothers, to single mothers as primarily paid workers. (2) What is the new role of fathers, and especially of single fathers, in Denmark? (3) What do the concepts of poverty, dependence and autonomy mean in Denmark?

FROM MOTHERS TO WORKERS

One of the dilemmas a state seems to face when adopting a policy that responds to the needs and demands of single mothers, is whether to put an emphasis on women as mothers, or women as paid workers. This can be noted in the way the social laws have been formulated in Denmark. The emphasis has changed over the years. Over the course of the period from the 1930s up to the present, the view of women as primarily mothers has changed to one where women are seen in social policy legislation as being primarily workers. This represents both a change in the discourse of social policy as well as in the social reality and priorities of women.

The change in view has come particularly since the Social Assistance Act of 1974. The Act sought to provide a new focus on the needs of the whole population rather than its most needy members only. As a result, the potential of women as workers, as well as a new concept of women as individuals, could be recognised in social policy. Women were no longer seen as the dependants of male income earners, or if these did not exist,

as dependants of the state. In order to provide some understanding of the shift which has recently occurred in how women have been viewed in Danish social policy it is necessary to provide a brief description of the history of Danish social policy, beginning from the 1930s.

In general, the 1930s mark a turning point for the development of the interventionist welfare state in Denmark. A large number of economic and social laws were passed during this decade, among which one of the most important was the Social Reform Act of 1933. In the Act, a distinction is made for the first time in the 'law on public care' between different groups of single mothers. The reason for being, or becoming, single was of primary importance in the description of the single mother within the legislation (*Dansk lovsamling*, 1933, pp. 346–7). In principle it was the duty of the father, when alive, to pay at least a part of the costs of the upbringing of a child (pp. 304–04, 367). It was possible for widows to receive the same amount of money as single mothers whose children's father was alive and legally responsible, but the widow was obliged to have a way of living that was approved of by the authorities (*Dansk lovsamling*, 1933, p. 380).¹ The other important prerequisite in order to be eligible for social assistance was Danish citizenship, with an additional clause of local residence for the mother, the father or the child (*Dansk lovsamling*, 1933, pp. 309–10, 367–69, 380).

This law should be seen against the background of the population and economic crises that were occurring at the time. During the 1930s fertility rates were falling, which caused many people to worry about the possible depopulation of Denmark (Rosenbeck, 1987, pp. 221–2).² The obvious solution to this was to (continue to) encourage women to embrace motherhood (Caspersen, 1985, pp. 25–7).

At the same time, new ideas on how to solve the problem of the decline in population were introduced through the influence of the Swedish social democrats Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, and their book on the population question. The book appeared in Danish in 1935. In the same year a population commission was created which conducted studies of child care issues, housing issues, the rights of mothers in connection to birth, and problems concerning sex instruction.³ One of the results was the 1939 law on Mother's Aid (*Mødrehjælpen*). The organisation worked for the benefit of young, single mothers, helping them when their children were born (Caspersen, 1985; Borchorst and Siim, 1986, pp. 76–7; Rosenbeck, 1987, pp. 221–2).

During the 1930s the Danish economy suffered from repeated crises. Although the effects were not felt as severely by women as by men in the workplace, because of the different occupations held by each group,

working life in general was not as prosperous as it might have been. Women's wages remained usually lower than those of men. If, as a result, income became a problem for the woman, due to the lack of day care, unemployment or low wages, and the only solution was to seek public assistance, her children under eighteen years of age were immediately put under the supervision of a social committee. The social committee could decide to institutionalise a child if this was deemed appropriate. This supervision was automatic when the child was born out of wedlock (Dansk lovsamling, 1933, pp. 342–3). This last piece of legislation was not abolished until the passage of the 1964 Law on Child and Youth Care (Plovsing, 1994, p. 51).

During the 1960s social policy in general underwent several significant changes. First, more areas of society were included within social policy. The previous focus on providing assistance only to the most needy was changed to include the needs of the entire population. The preventive and supportive elements of social policy were also emphasised, whereas the humiliating aspects associated with public assistance and the desire for social control were de-emphasised. Political reform shifted responsibility for the implementation of public and economic policy to the local level, forming the institutional basis for a social reform of the 1970s (Plovsing, 1994, pp. 52–5). This was the first reform of the Public Care Act. It was now called the Social Assistance Act, of which the major part of the legislation appeared in 1974 (Dansk lovsamling, 1974). Considering the fact that it appeared during a period of economic crisis, it was a rather advanced piece of legislation. The name 'Social Assistance' was also a sign of the new direction taken in the Danish welfare state.

The 1974 reform tried to eliminate the complex administrative structure of social service provision at that time. The structure included a large number of social aid organs, often working inefficiently and without sufficient coordination. Concentrating the resources within the social system into a centralised structure was seen as necessary to meet the goals of this social reform. These goals included prevention, client motivation, security and well-being (Plovsing, 1994, pp. 52–5). As a consequence of this centralisation, many of the government assistance institutions were restructured or consolidated; the Mother's Aid, for instance, was closed.

Against the background of the economic crisis (the so-called first oil crisis) of the 1970s, the Danish state experienced financial difficulties. This led in turn to a crisis of political legitimacy. Large sections of society began to question the proper function and benefits of the welfare state, given the large number of public servants employed and the high levels of

taxation. In the wake of the second oil crisis at the end of the 1970s, the economic situation worsened. A new orientation in social policy can therefore be identified after 1980, of which the most important legislation was written in 1983 (Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark, 1983). A discussion on privatisation within the government began, one which was seen as very important for the future direction of social policies. This debate involved both the issues of what social problems should be solved through market oriented, or civil systems, and what through the public sector. This also led to a public debate over the degree of responsibility individuals should have in their own lives (Plovsing, 1994, pp. 58–61). In the 1990s, the most important legislation relating to social policy for single mothers occurred in 1992 (Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark, 1992). But neither the 1983 nor the 1992 changes had the impact of the Act of 1974.

The differences between current social policies and those of the 1930s can be described in three ways. The general emphasis of social policy today has been to view women not as mothers, as in the 1930s, but as paid workers. This is probably the most important change of the three. It expresses a change in the social and civil rights of women in Danish society. It means that today women can be acknowledged as income earners. Single mothers might have worked in the 1930s, but were in the eyes of the state always related first, to an ex-husband and, second, to the state, before they were seen as individuals in law.

The present system, which has developed since the 1970s, can be described as universal. It addresses income earners in general (Dansk lovsamling, 1974). The individual's responsibilities towards the state as found in the Social Assistance Act says that a man or woman has the responsibility to provide for themselves, their partner and any children under the age of 18. This responsibility for the partner disappears with separation or divorce, but not for the child; unless the child marries or has a child. When a person is required to pay alimony to another person but cannot do so, the state will assist in paying. The person then has to pay the state back (Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark, 1992). This means that a divorced person can be part of a household, but at the same time have family ties, through a child, with someone living at another address.⁴ A single income earner (responsible for a child in a former relationship) can therefore cohabit with somebody else.

In addressing single income earners in the Social Assistance Act, the moral regulation of single mothers is thereby diminished, at the same time as the emphasis on men as fathers is strengthened. But it does not mean that the Social Assistance Act openly acknowledges the fact that

single income earners do not belong to the dual income earner norm, and that most families with children and either one or two adults cannot live on one income.⁵ In general, the dual income earner concept can be said to be inherent in the universal model, or ideal, adopted by Danish social authorities. The effects of this assumption are positive in the sense that women, including single mothers, are accepted as income earners. But the effects are also negative in that for single mothers this means that problems due to the economic crisis, or the gender segregated labour market, problems which make it more difficult to survive on one income, are not sufficiently acknowledged in social policies. It could also be argued that whereas women today have rights and duties as income earners, the new challenge may be seen as one of giving men rights and duties as carers.

The second difference from social legislation in the past is the role played by the requirement of Danish citizenship, which was of importance during the 1930s. The 1974 Act made a distinction between women who were or had been married to Danes, and those women who had not. The social rights for women who were divorced from Danes or had been widowed while married to Danes were improved (*Dansk lovsamling*, 1974). The importance of marriage in social policy applied only for women. Migrant men married or formerly married to Danish women did not have similar rights. Women were clearly defined in relation to men, whether foreign or not, whereas the opposite was not the case.⁶

In 1992, the Social Assistance Act was changed; the section on migrant women with former family relations to Danish men was removed from the legislation. This did not indicate that migrant men or women, whether married to Danes or not, could not receive social assistance. It simply meant that in case of an international or bilateral agreement with an international organisation or the country of origin, foreign citizens would be given the opportunity of receiving social assistance (*Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark*, 1992). This does not change the fact that different groups of migrants have different (social) rights; it just changes the composition of the involved groups and bases this on a different foundation.

The third difference can be said to be the entry of Denmark into the European Union. The impact on national social or equality policies of membership should not be exaggerated, as the European Union has not had this as its main objective. Some directives can be said to have influenced the direction of Danish social politics directly, as did the directive on equal pay in 1975. European Union economic policies have a more indirect influence (see also Hoskyns, 1992; Borchorst, 1994).

SINGLE MOTHERS AND SINGLE INCOME EARNERS: AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP

The concept of single mothers in Danish law is related to the concept of income earners under the law. Today single mothers are perceived under the law as being single income earners, emphasis being placed on the fact that the income earners are single: gender is not an issue. This focus not only emphasises the role of women as income earners, but also serves to highlight the changing view of fathers in Danish society.

The concept of *enlige forsørgere* (the single income earner) is the term that is used mainly in Danish legislation and in official statistics. The term 'income earner' has changed its statistical meaning over time, as it has in general language use. Earlier the term 'income earner' served to indicate a male income earner, heading a household consisting of a wife and children. This was the norm. A 'single income earner', on the other hand, indicated a household specifically headed by one income earner, who was presumably a woman and a mother. The ways in which the different categories of mothers – widows, separated or divorced mothers, unwed mothers – were treated by the law varied primarily due to changing moral standards. Similarly, the responsibilities of fathers to their families were defined by moral considerations: they were not expected to participate within the household except in regard to financial concerns. Today the 'dual income earner' model has become the norm in Danish social policy. A 'single income earner' now indicates a situation in which one income earner (male or female) is financially responsible for his or her children.

By using the term 'single income earner' when indicating a single parent, men and women are supposedly treated identically by current Danish social policies. The focus on parenthood, on the other hand, as well as on the other parent, disappears. This means that important elements of single parenthood are avoided. It ignores the aspects of gender inequality present in society, and thereby the different realities single fathers and single mothers experience in Denmark. It is not always simply the fact that there is only one income earner in this family type that is of interest. That this single income earner is also a parent can complicate the situation. As positive an influence on life as children can be, problems can arise in relation to the role of parenting, both in terms of the possibilities to perform paid work, and the amount of, or way in which time can be spent. These concerns do not arise for single income earners without children; they may have a different effect on fathers than on mothers.

In this context an important issue is what is meant by the terms 'sin-

gle', and 'together', when applied to single mothers. In spite of a separation or divorce from the other parent, the degree of involvement of the other parent in the life of the single mother is not thereby predetermined. The actions of the single mother as a parent are to some extent determined by the rules for custody, and the actual practice of custody rights for mothers *and* fathers concerning how often they meet the children. Does the other parent see the children every other weekend, or do visits occur for one or two weeks at a time? The financial arrangements related to custody issues are also important. Both of these aspects, which result from being separated or divorced from the other parent, have a direct bearing on the life of the single mother, both as a parent and as a working individual. To discuss the degree to which single mothers are in fact 'single' or 'together' with the other parent, or some other person, is to begin a description of the social transitions which are taking place within Danish society today with respect to the practices of motherhood and fatherhood. The fact that these transitions are taking place and are not accounted for within the 'single income earner' concept, points to the deficiencies of the latter typology when defining the social policies that are to apply to single mothers.

According to Dion Sommer (1994, pp. 156–7) there are three processes that have influenced the role of fathers in Danish society:

- (1) The separation of the home from the place of employment.
- (2) The polarisation of what is seen as male and female.
- (3) The sentimentalisation of childhood and motherhood, leaving little space for fathers within the family.

Sommer sees considerable evidence in Danish society of pressure on men to get actively involved with the family and childrearing. First, the changing roles of working men and their changing economic status force a reconsideration of the view that women should have sole responsibility for the family. Second, the increased amount of working hours for women forces men to take part in family life in a more active way.

For a long time in Denmark men could take two types of paid parental leave from work. There was fathers' leave, which provided for fathers to be present at home during the first two weeks after the birth of the child. The second was parental leave, which covered the parents' right to employment leave up to the period of fifteen to twenty-four weeks after birth. This could be shared freely between the parents, although it could not be taken at the same time by both. In 1985, 4 per cent of new fathers took their two weeks of fathers' leave, while 3 per cent used the addi-

tional right to parental leave. In 1991, the figures were 53 per cent and an unchanged 3 per cent, respectively (Carlsen, 1994, p. 80). In 1992, parental leave was extended to thirty-six weeks. In 1994, both types of leave were replaced by the Child Care Law, which provides the possibility for employment leave of up to 1 year per child, for each parent (Plovsing, 1994, p. 76).

According to Danish social statistics, fathers do not use their right to parental leave very often. Several reasons can be given for this fact. In a study conducted by Søren Carlsen (1994), mothers were often found to mention, as a reason for the father's not taking parental leave, the fact that they were nursing the child for at least the first six months after birth. As the parental leave only covers the first six months of the child's life, this fact is problematic. (However, the current temporary law on special parental leave available until the child is nine years of age, should offer more possibilities.) Fathers more often mentioned the negative impact on the family's economy as the major reason for not being able to take parental leave. Some of the other reasons of importance mentioned in the Carlsen study for the father not taking parental leave, was the situation at the father's workplace, where the employers discouraged a leave of absence for child rearing; also the fact that many families did not even consider the possibility.

Danish researchers have also confirmed that there is a difference between which fathers take parental leave. The higher the education of the father, the more likely it is that parental leave is taken. Publicly employed men are also more apt to take parental leave, and the difference between occupations is considerable.⁷ The employment situation of the mother also plays a role. When she has a permanent position, is in a career track, and has a high income, the fathers are more likely to use their right to parental leave (Carlsen, 1994, pp. 80–3).

Whether the employment situation of the father permits leave seems to depend strongly on the attitude of his employer and colleagues. The demands of pursuing a career play a role, as does the fact of whether there is a replacement in the workplace for the absent father. It is more accepted within the private sector for fathers to take father's leave, than it is to take parental leave. Child care after the birth, like the care of sick children, seems to be something more controversial, and dismissed as a seemingly non-male duty (Carlsen, 1994, pp. 87–9).

By highlighting the role of fathers in Denmark through 'father friendly' legislation and the use of the concept of the single income earner, both parents can be said to have obtained recognition in social policies both as parents and as workers. At the same time, there are differences between the way men and women are active within the labour

market, differences which are important for people's possibilities and choices as parents and workers. The effects on single mothers of the position of women within the Danish economy can be analysed in terms of autonomy, poverty and dependence.

AUTONOMY, POVERTY AND DEPENDENCE

The problems that single parents face in Denmark are largely a consequence of the tension which exists between employment and family life. The different ways in which this is experienced rest upon the type of relation of dependency (on the state, the market or the other parent of the child) and the type of resource deficiency (material resources or time) that is relevant for the parent. The primary aims of contemporary social policy in Denmark are those of independence and autonomy, implying that all individuals, men as well as women, above the age of eighteen, in principle, are supposed to earn their own living. This is combined with an assumption of public solidarity and equality with weak groups that cannot provide for themselves. The discussion on dependency and poverty that follows raises questions about the way the concepts of independence and autonomy are connected to the individualistic norm.

Two observations can be made when talking about the employment experiences of single mothers. The first is that single mothers work full time more often than married mothers (Elm Larsen and Sørensen, 1994, p. 145). The importance of the logic of individualism, which forms one of the central norms of the Danish welfare state, means that this result is not surprising. But the fact that single mothers work full time more often indicates something about the demands of autonomy and independence, as put forward by Danish social legislation. The effects of these demands are different for single mothers and married mothers. This reveals something about the living conditions experienced by women who divorce; their conditions of employment and the possibilities for economic independence that they can expect after divorcing.

Second, single mothers are unemployed more often than married couples. Single fathers are also unemployed more often in comparison to married fathers, but they have a higher degree of integration into the labour market than do single mothers. Single fathers more often have a vocational education, while single mothers typically have longer educations than single fathers. However these are rarely vocational (Elm Larsen and Sørensen, 1994, pp. 145–6).

Different groups of single mothers can be identified. In the 1930s, these would have been defined in terms of whether the women were widows, separated or divorced mothers, or mothers who had never married. The

current Danish Social Assistance Act does not identify single mothers specifically, but rather 'single income earners' as a group (Dansk lovsamling, 1974). Today in Denmark two groups of single mothers can be identified as being in starkest contrast to each other in terms of their situation before and after a divorce. Those are women who are employed, with an academic background, and uneducated, unemployed women. Their possibilities in life differ in a way that makes them hard to compare, other than through the language of contrasts.

These contrasts reveal themselves in the fact that full-time working single mothers suffer from 'time poverty' and stress, while the unemployed, poorly educated single mothers suffer from material poverty and increased isolation. For low income employed single mothers, child care costs represent a large portion of their income. The pre-tax earnings of single parents are usually lower than those of married couples. Generally speaking it can be said that economic poverty among single parents, and particularly among single mothers, is higher than among married couples (Elm Larsen and Sørensen, 1994, pp. 146–7).

The ability of unemployed single mothers to enter the labour market is constrained by the fact that they are increasingly discriminated against in public day care. Many Danish local authorities are said, normally, not to offer day-care possibilities to children of unemployed people (Elm Larsen and Sørensen, 1994, p. 146). While this was declared illegal already in 1977, a couple of years later it was still an accepted practice for authorities to prioritise children of full-time working parents before the children of unemployed parents and students (Borchorst and Siim, 1984, p. 209). For poorly paid, employed single parents, day care fees take up a large part of disposable income, thereby creating the preconditions for a poverty trap (Elm Larsen and Sørensen, 1994, p. 146).

Statistics reveal that single men with children have very high average total family incomes in comparison both to single mothers and to couples. (Dansk Statistik, 1994, table 217, Total family incomes in 1991, in 1,000 Danish Crowns. Income figures include the total primary income, transfer payments, and income from assets.) This difference is most pronounced when comparing the income figures of single men and women. Men seem, in material terms, to be better off being single fathers than getting married, as income differences are affected by gender. In material terms, married mothers are, through the income of the husband, 'compensated' for the effects of gender on the labour market in a way that single mothers are not. Married mothers are 'compensated' for working part time to a higher degree than single mothers, for having a lower income than men and, apparently, less attractive career prospects.

The results in the upper income levels of single women also indicate lower career positions. On an individual level, the dual income earner norm seems therefore to result in advantages and disadvantages that are different for men and women, and for married and unmarried persons.

The differences in resources between single parents in general and between single mothers in particular can be very great. This takes the form both of material disadvantages and of time constraints. The similarities between parent couples and certain groups of single parents can be greater than those between single parents. The specific problems of single parents are centred around the tension between work and family life. This tension is much more problematic for single parents than for married couples, and, in terms of material poverty, is more severely felt by single mothers than by single fathers.

The concept of poverty is not widely used in a Scandinavian or in a Danish discourse. However the same phenomena that are studied under the heading of problems related to 'poverty' in other countries, are in the Scandinavian context studied under the headings 'low-income groups' or 'groups with extremely stressed living conditions' or the problems of 'extremely low income groups'. These categories arose in Danish policy legislation so as to express the living conditions of people in poor and stressful environments, not those experiencing conditions of extreme poverty below the minimum subsistence level (Hansen, 1989, pp. 40–1). Lately, definitions of 'poverty of resources' and 'modern poverty', have started to be used in social policy legislation and social research, along with discussions on marginalisation.

Andersen and Elm Larsen (1994, pp. 14–17) have pointed out that previous studies on the concept of poverty in Denmark have focused on describing the population in poverty, or in danger of becoming impoverished, as varying from 1 per cent to 10 per cent, depending on the initial baseline chosen for discussion. This can be defined either as an absolute or a relative concept of poverty. By absolute poverty is meant the worst off, those who are totally excluded and marginalised from the rest of society. In June 1992, a discussion was held by the Danish Parliamentary Committee on Social Affairs, where this definition was introduced by means of a report. The group of totally excluded was said to be 40,000 persons in the mid-1980s, which was about 1 per cent of the Danish population. Since then about 10,000 more people have been included in this definition. Relative poverty, on the other hand, concentrates not on the physical aspects of poverty, but rather on the social aspects, defined in terms of restricted potential life-style choices in comparison to the accepted

room. With a life of scarcity, by which people survive and are not socially integrated in society, as the baseline, relative poverty in Denmark can be said to vary from between 5 to 10 per cent of the population.

Recently the focus of public debate in Denmark seems to have moved to unemployment and labour market exclusion. The large number of people of working age who are long-term recipients of social security benefits is seen by many as a major social problem. The result has been the official adoption of the concept of social exclusion for use by the Ministry of Social Affairs and other governmental agencies (Andersen and Elm Larsen, 1994, pp. 14–17).

The definitions of poverty in Danish legislation described above are premised on a concept of autonomy and independence, which are the explicit aims expressed in the Social Assistance Act. This is done under the assumption that individuals earn their own living, but also under the assumption that they live in a family consisting of two income earners. During the 1980s, the Social Democratic governments that had led the country for years were replaced by non-socialist minority governments. The latter introduced the concept of 'privatisation' into the discussion of the tasks of social policies in the welfare state. The concept of privatisation implies that individual citizens should take greater responsibility for their own lives and problems (Plovsing, 1994, pp. 60–1).

Thaulow and Gamst (1987) have studied the social conditions experienced by single income earners, the assistance that social service departments can offer, as well as possibilities on the part of the welfare state to realise the independence of single income earners by diminishing their reliance on social assistance.⁸ They found that secondary transfer payments, such as housing and child benefits, were more important for single income earners than for married couples. Housing benefits were largely targeted at single income earners (Thaulow and Gamst, 1987, p. 62). For unemployed receivers of social benefits a dilemma can arise that is particular to their situation. Where employment leads to tax deductions, lowering of housing benefits, and increased child care costs, the material gains that come with low income employment are small. However, an important aspect of employment for the unemployed is independence from state assistance. In the interviews conducted by Thaulow and Gamst, the single income earners indicated that this sense of independence was the main incentive for seeking employment, in spite of the increased costs and low wage conditions experienced (Thaulow and Gamst, 1987, pp. 125–30).

In the same study (1987, pp. 28–35), independence was found to consist of two aspects. Economic independence was indicated simply by

being employed and having an income with which to cover the costs of one's livelihood. Having social independence meant that the single income earner could function socially on a daily basis, without the development or accumulation of social problems. These forms of independence were not seen as being necessarily related to one another. Some of the problems which have an effect on the lack of economic independence cannot be resolved through the support of the social service departments. Examples of these problems are the inequalities due to the genderised labour market or educational system, high housing costs or the effects of a downturn in the economy. In seeking to resolve the problems associated with long-term unemployment, the existing structure of social benefits may not be sufficient; other policies should be looked at as well.

The concept of dependency is a difficult one. According to Fraser and Gordon (1994) it includes assumptions about human nature, gender roles, the causes of poverty, the sources of entitlement, and what counts as work and as a contribution to society. It also alludes to a state of independence, which is seen as positive and often connected to employment and economic independence. An alternative interpretation of dependency is emphasised when discussing the fact that the vast majority of mothers rely on another person's income, either in the form of some type of child support or the income of a husband who, statistically, earns three times what the woman earns. Fathers are also dependent in the sense that they rely on the unpaid labour of women to raise children and care for the home (this is also true of divorced or separated fathers). The latter two definitions of dependency do not encompass the plight of single mothers, who take care of child rearing, homemaking and earning an income.

The dependency of single mothers is articulated in different ways. Interviews of Finnish, British and American single women performed by Tuula Gordon (1994a, see also 1994b), revealed that these single women saw 'independent' women as self-sufficient financially, able to take care of themselves, in control of their own lives and able to formulate their own views. But the women also described how being alone could at the same time mean being lonely, always having to make one's own decisions, always having to be responsible and sort out one's own problems, and confront the expectations of support from others. The least appreciated element was therefore emotional independence. Abstract individualism was not idealised, as it was seen as autonomy in isolation. Rather, a new type of individualism was sought by these women, one which was based on maintaining independence while caring for, and being cared for by, others. This could also be seen as a way of

trying to steer away from the dependence/independence dichotomy and replacing this with the drive for interdependence.

In practical terms there is a form of dependency which is experienced in Denmark by those single mothers who are divorced or separated. This occurs in the relationship between themselves and the fathers of the children, when custody of the children is shared in one way or another. Fathers are also dependent on mothers. Fathers may, for example, take care of the children during certain periods, while mothers take care of the children for the majority of the time. This can lead sometimes to a lot of stress and problems or just as possibly to the creation of a functioning relationship between the parents, one which gives the children the opportunity to keep in touch with both parents, as is the general intention behind Danish custody laws.

Another dependency which single mothers often experience is on the state. This applies not only to the small group of single mothers who, for periods, receive social assistance, but also to those single mothers who take advantage of the child care and employment possibilities provided by the state. This dependence on public child care can be seen as a positive dependence on the state. It serves as a precondition for the autonomy of single mothers in the workplace.

THE UNIVERSAL AND INDIVIDUAL WELFARE STATE

According to mainstream welfare state research, what distinguishes the Danish welfare state from other welfare states is its system of universalist social policies. A feminist critique of the Danish welfare state focuses instead on an alternative typology in terms of a male income earner model. In Esping-Andersen's typology (Esping-Andersen, 1990), Denmark is described as having adopted universalist social policies. Through its focus on individualisation and universality it offers a seemingly sympathetic social environment for women. What is problematic with Esping-Andersen's typology is that it is incapable of revealing the consequences of the gendered character of the welfare state and the problems this creates for women in Danish society. This is the basic premise of the feminist critique of mainstream typologies, which has been developed by, amongst others, Jane Lewis and Ilona Ostner (1994, pp. 16–19).

Lewis and Ostner (1994) argue that when gender is treated as a separate variable in the structure of welfare regimes it cuts across established typologies because of the division between paid and unpaid labour. Governments provide entitlements to women as paid workers, but the tendency within policy has been to make a dichotomous choice between treating women either as wives and mothers, or as paid workers, with

the former category being predominant within policy decisions. To account for this fact, Lewis and Ostner use the concept of the male 'breadwinner'. The application of this concept in the analysis of welfare state systems serves as a predictor of the way in which women are treated in social security systems, the level of social service provision and the nature of married women's participation in the labour market.

In an attempt to broaden the discussion of the variation found amongst welfare states, so as to include the extent to which they recognise women as workers, Diane Sainsbury (1994, pp. 150–69) proposes an analytical framework which contains specific women's entitlements, as wives, workers, mothers and citizens. Sainsbury suggests a differentiation between a 'breadwinner' model of the welfare state in which the idea of the family celebrates marriage and a strict division of labour between husband and wife, and an 'individual' model of the welfare state in which notions of the family assume that each spouse is individually responsible for his or her maintenance and that husband and wife share the tasks of financial support and care of their children.

The concepts of the income earner proposed by Diane Sainsbury and by Jane Lewis and Ilona Ostner, have in the Danish case, the advantage of highlighting the differences between the Danish system as it worked in the past, and the 1990s, as well as between Denmark and other European countries. They pinpoint some of the key questions that concern women as both mothers and workers. In spite of different conceptualisations of the problems that can arise for individual men and women, these studies effectively reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the Danish model of the welfare state.

CONCLUSION

In the work of Gøsta Esping-Andersen and others, Denmark is described as a welfare system built upon universal social policies. In Jane Lewis and Ilona Ostner's view the Danish welfare state advocates a very weak model of the male breadwinner. Diane Sainsbury would describe Denmark's social welfare system as being premised in part on the importance of the individual model, as each spouse is individually responsible for his or her maintenance, husband and wife share the task of financial support and care for their children. There is an acknowledgement of women as paid workers in Denmark and of a dual income earner system, as well as of the responsibility of fathers as well as mothers towards their children.

The social rights of single mothers are part of this system of universal rights. This can be said to be positive for this group of women. It has led Denmark, as opposed to the United Kingdom or the United States, away

from a system of moral regulation of single mothers. It has also enabled mothers, and especially single mothers, to obtain public benefits as individuals. The new dilemmas faced by welfare states can be recognised specifically when we focus on single mothers. This is the motivation as to why we have concerned ourselves in the Danish case with the study of an otherwise rather heterogeneous group of women with a low political profile. The dilemmas that have been discussed here are connected to the existence of gender-neutral social legislation in combination with universal social policies. The gender-neutral social legislation highlights the role of fathers, as well as the gendered division of labour, as women are obliged to work. The generous system of universal social policies is at the same time challenged due to the economic crisis and its effect in terms of a high amount of unemployment on the labour market.

The gender-neutral social legislation at the same time fails to address the differences which exist between income earners in terms of whether they are married or not, or are men or women. In this sense the social legislation can rather be said to be gender blind. The earlier discussion on material and social poverty should be seen in this light. It can be difficult for newly divorced women who have been working part time in order to put in a lot of time and energy with their children, to find out that this time is not valued highly in the labour market. Starting in or returning to a full-time job can become problematic, as the level of one's education and work experience plays a decisive role. This is totally separate from the fact that unemployment levels in Denmark are very high, which makes a change of career, or the opportunity to obtain work, much more difficult. On the other hand, the women who do divorce are sometimes already working full-time, and then are financially, although maybe not in terms of time, in an advantageous position in comparison to part-time working women. This highlights also the impact of class differences between single mothers. As the gendered differences in income are more severely felt by single women than by married women, a lowering in the standard of living upon divorce may still occur, even if the woman does have a well-paying job. Thus, the effects of the genderised labour market are felt by all women, but particularly by single mothers.

The universal character of Danish social legislation also stresses the role of fathers. It can be an advantage for single mothers who suffer from severe time constraints to have someone with whom to share the responsibility of the children, but this can also mean a new form of dependence. It can be extremely difficult for the single mother when a father who was uninterested in the family suddenly wants, and also gets, all the attention from the children. Women who divorce need manifold economic and

social resources in order to survive a divorce successfully. If this stress on the role of the father is not also combined with a policy directed towards the social and economic situation of single mothers, the final result will be unsatisfactory for women.

Some of the dilemmas created by universal social policies could be remedied by treating single mothers in relation to their specific needs in society and, for example, targeting benefits to single mothers instead of to all mothers and giving them preferential treatment in the day-care system. This would at least erase the differences between the effects of the obligation to work for married mothers as opposed to single mothers. At the same time this could be combined with long-term policies concerning labour market issues for women, overcoming the gendered division of labour, as well as care issues for men, and overcoming the gendered divisions of care. In the long run it might then become possible to find a better balance between the aim of autonomy for individual men and women and the realities of the lives and aims of men and women.

NOTES

- 1 More research needs to be done on the concepts of dependency and breadwinners in relation to underprivileged single mothers. The differences between widows, separated/divorced and unmarried mothers seem to be of great importance for the kind of dependency that is addressed.
- 2 Danmarks Statistik (1938), table 18, p. 25 on the fertility rate shows a decrease until 1993 after which the fertility rate rises again.
- 3 The secretary was Jørgen S. Dich, who was the translator of the Myrdal book. The commission was installed by Minister of Social Affairs Steincke, and consisted of persons with special knowledge of macro-economics, statistics and social politics. Three out of eleven commission members were women. Seven sub-commissions were installed, among others one on pregnancy help and one on mothers in working life. They contained experts on the separate topics together with commission members. Women had a decent representation in this, according to Caspersen (1985, pp. 123–5).
- 4 The definition of a household according to Dansk statistik is 'all persons living on the same address (in the same home, house, residence), without consideration taken of their family connections'. In that sense, several families can live in the same household. Dansk statistik, 1994, p. 39.
- 5 The degree of poverty among married parents with one income can therefore be said to be sometimes higher than the degree of poverty among single parents. See table 1.
- 6 I have not studied refugee aid, but the whole concept of labour market migration, as opposed to refugee migration or family reunification, seems not to exist for women. Women are supposed to have entered the country by either family reunification or by means of a refugee status and this latter is often defined also by the status of the husband or another male relative. See also European Union document (1988), pp. 5–7; Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), pp. 114, 124–5; on the background of legal differences in principles of citizenship see Brubaker (1992), pp. 81–2.
- 7 See also table 7.1 and 7.2 in Carlsen and Elm Larsen (1994).
- 8 The study covered two data bases, one showing data material from 10,772 adults, of whom 253 were single breadwinners. This material covered family conditions, education, working conditions, occupation, economy and housing conditions. Another data base was constructed covering eighteen municipalities and their social services departments. Nineteen clients from these municipalities were also interviewed concerning their problems and with their permission their journals were also studied, pp. 213–16.

REFERENCES

- J. Andersen and J. Elm Larsen (1994), *Poverty III – Final Report – Denmark*, Centre for Social Integration and Differentiation, Copenhagen.
- F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis (1992), *Racialized Boundaries*, Routledge, London.
- A. Borchorst (1994), 'Welfare state regimes, women's interests and the EC', in D. Sainsbury (ed.), *Gendering Welfare States*, Sage, London.
- A. Borchorst and B. Siim (1984), *Kvinder i Velfærdsstaten – mellem moderskab og lønarbejde gennem 100 år*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, Aalborg.
- R. Brubaker (1992), *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- S. Carlsen (1994), 'Mænds brug af fædre- og forældreorlov', in S. Carlsen and J. Elm Larsen (eds.), *Den Svære Balance*, Ligestillingsrådet, Copenhagen.
- S. Carlsen and J. Elm Larsen (1994), *Den Svære Balance*, Ligestillingsrådet, Copenhagen.
- H. Caspersen (1985), *Moderskabspolitik i Danmark i 30'erne det modsætningsfyldte moderskab*, Den Danske Historiske Forening, Copenhagen.
- Dansk lovsamling (1933), Lov om offentlig forsorg, nr 181. 20 May 1933, Copenhagen.
- Dansk lovsamling (1974), Lov om social bistand, nr 333. 19 June 1974, Copenhagen.
- Danmarks Statistik (1938), *Statistisk Årbog 1938*, Copenhagen.
- Danmarks Statistik (1994), *Statistisk Årbog 1994*, Copenhagen.
- J. Elm Larsen and A. M. Sørensen (1994), 'Enlige forsørgere' in S. Carlsen and J. Elm Larsen (eds.), *Den Svære Balance*, Ligestillingsrådet, Copenhagen.
- G. Esping-Andersen (1990), *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- European Union document (1988). COM (88) 743 final.
- N. Fraser and L. Gordon (1994), 'Dependency' demystified: inscriptions of power in a keyword of the welfare state', in *Social Politics*, 1: 1, 4–31.
- T. Gordon (1994a), 'Single women and familism – challenge from the margins', in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 1: 2, 165–82.
- T. Gordon (1994b), *Single Women – On the Margins?*, Macmillan, London.
- E. J. Hansen (1989), *Fattigdom – begreber og metoder i forskning og politik*, Social Forsknings Institut, Copenhagen.
- C. Hoskyns (1992), 'The European Community's policy on women in the context of 1992', in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15: 1, 21–8.
- C. Jencks (1992), *Rethinking Social Policy – Race, Poverty and the Underclass*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- J. Lewis (1993), 'Introduction: women, work, family and social policies in Europe', in *Women and Social Policies in Europe*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot.
- J. Lewis and I. Ostner (1994), *Gender and the Evolution of European Social Policies*, ZeS-Arbeitspapier Nr. 4/94, Centre for Social Policy Research, Bremen.
- Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark (1983), afd A II, Bekendtgørelse af Lov om social bistand nr 356. 19 July, Copenhagen.
- Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark (1992), afd A III, Bekendtgørelse af lov om social bistand nr 829. 1 October, Copenhagen.
- A. Myrdal and G. Myrdal (1934), *Kris i Befolkningsfrågan*, Bonnier, Stockholm.
- J. Plovsing (1994), *Socialpolitik*, Handelshøjskolens Forlag, Copenhagen.
- B. Rosenbeck (1987), *Kvindekøen – Den moderne kvindeligheds historie 1880–1980*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen.
- D. Sainsbury (1994), 'Women's and men's social rights: gendering dimensions of welfare states', in D. Sainsbury (ed.), *Gendering Welfare States*, Sage, London.
- D. Sommer (1994), 'Fædre og børn: Betyder de noget for hinanden', in S. Carlsen and J. Elm Larsen (eds.), *Den Svære Balance*, Ligestillingsrådet, Copenhagen.
- M. Song with J. Lewis (1995), *Lone Parents and the Changing Discourse Around Maintenance in Britain*, working paper, London School of Economics, London.
- I. Thaulow and B. Gamst (1987), *Enlige forsørgere mellem selvforsørgelse og bistandshjælp*, Socialforskningsinstituttet, Copenhagen.