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The triple bind of single-parent families: resources, employment and policies

Rense Nieuwenhuis¹ and Laurie C. Maldonado

The days when Tolstoy opened *Anna Karenina* with ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’, to reflect a dominant discourse on the nuclear family as the singular form of happiness and wellbeing, are long gone. Alongside the second demographic transition – women gaining economic independence and better control over their fertility, improvements in gender equality and changing norms on family and gender – a diversity of family forms emerged. Wellbeing and happiness, as well as unhappiness, can be found in all families, regardless of family structure. This challenges the assertion that any one family form will always ensure wellbeing over another. Indeed, as Myrdal and Klein noted in 1956: ‘Though it is fairly easy to describe what constitutes a bad home, there is no simple definition of a good one. Conformity with the traditional pattern certainly is no guarantee of the happiest results’ (p. 126).

In ongoing debates on high and rising inequality, there is reason for concern as to whether policies are able to keep up with the changing dynamics of families. Families and inequality are at the centre of this debate. The focus of this book is the wellbeing of single parents and their children, broadly defined as including emotional and cognitive wellbeing, school performance, work–family balance and health, as well as economic wellbeing, employment and the absence of poverty.

Single-parent families face challenges that are constantly evolving, and in relation to these challenges they are more likely to experience (periods of) impaired wellbeing compared to, for instance, coupled-parent families. This is in part because in most countries lower socioeconomic wellbeing leads to single parenthood being more common, and in part due to single parents facing more challenges in securing wellbeing for themselves and their families. This book predominantly deals with the latter: under what *combination* of

conditions can single parents have better wellbeing? Explanations for single parents' wellbeing are often quick to emphasise that single parents on average have fewer resources, such as their lower level of education. Yet, without discounting the importance of such resources, this book will demonstrate that how single parents' resources are expressed in terms of their wellbeing fundamentally depends on their employment conditions and their social policy context. Single parents' employment is affected by labour markets that are increasingly characterised by wage inequality and precariousness. Policies and institutions matter for single-parent families, while welfare states face budget constraints and adapt their social policies with more reliance on employment. Indeed, the main argument of this book is that single parents, more often than many other families, have to negotiate the complexities of a triple bind: the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies.

Single parents' wellbeing

The terminology of single parenthood is complex, and what it means to be a single parent has changed over time and varies across the single parents' life course. By default, we use the term 'single parent' (or single-parent household) to refer to those parents who raise one or more of their children while not living in the same household as their partner. We do not use this term to differentiate parents who were single when they had their child from those who separated or were bereaved. Single parents can live with other adults in the same household, such as grandparents, but not with a (new) partner. We refer to 'coupled parents' (or coupled-parent households) to reflect that either or both of the adults in the household are the biological parent of the child or children, and to include re-partnered parents. Where necessary, chapters introduce more detailed terminology.

Trends in single parenthood are presented in Figure 1.1, showing single-parent households as a percentage of all households with dependent children for 24 countries.² In the majority of countries, except perhaps Estonia and Slovakia, prevalence of single parenthood was stable or rising during recent decades. In the US and the UK, and more recently in Sweden, Denmark and Ireland, approximately 25% of all households with children were headed by a single parent. Although not shown in Figure 1.1, the majority of single-parent families are headed by women. In OECD countries, only about 12% of single-parent families were headed by a father (OECD, 2011).

Figure 1.1: Trends in single parenthood

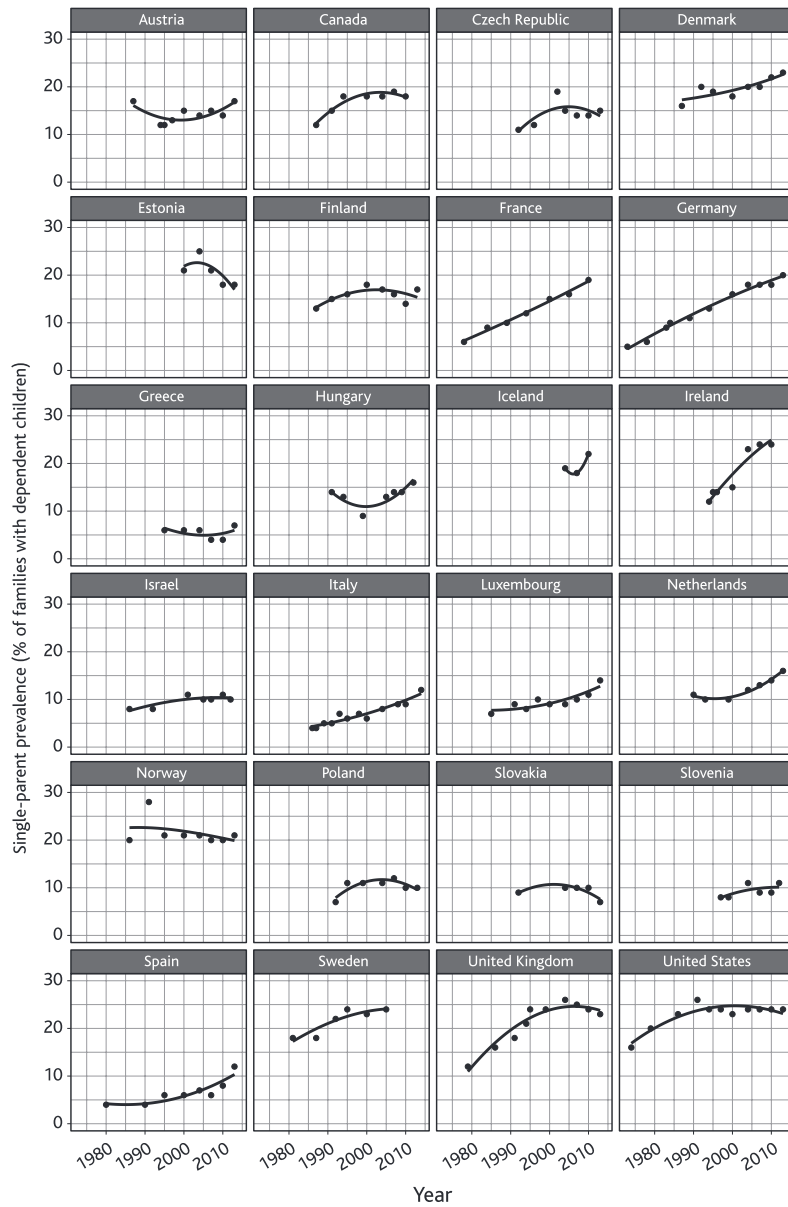
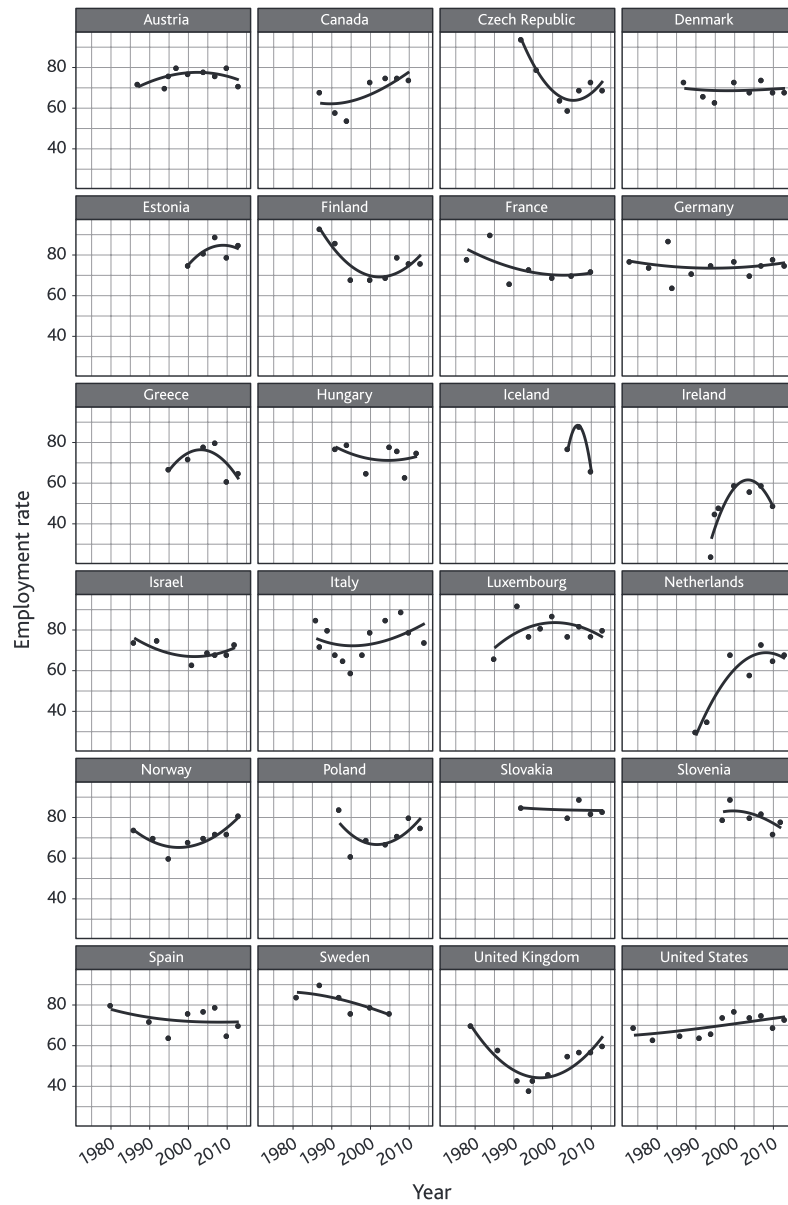


Figure 1.2 shows the employment rates among single parents. Typically, these rates are high: close to, or above, 80% of the heads of single-parent families are actively involved in some form of gainful employment. The United Kingdom and Ireland, as well as the Netherlands in early years, form exceptions with lower employment

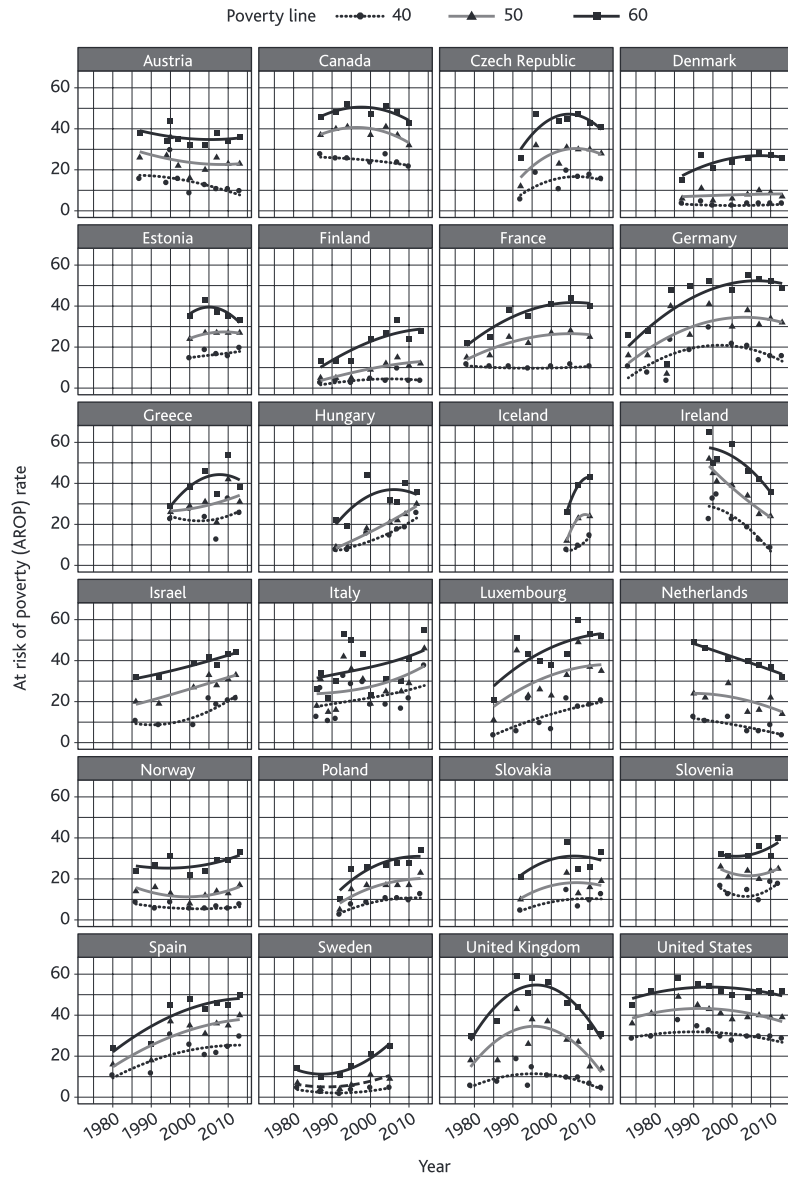
Figure 1.2: Trends in single parents' employment



among single-parent families. Trends varied across countries, with single parents' employment rising in the Netherlands, Canada and to some extent the US. A decline was observed in France and Sweden.

Figure 1.3 shows the 'at risk of poverty' (AROP) rates of single-parent families. Despite the high employment rates we saw in Figure 1.2, it

Figure 1.3: Trends in single parents' poverty risks



is clear that single-parent families face high risks of poverty. Although not shown, poverty risks among single-parent families are substantially higher than those among coupled-parent families (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). The poverty threshold of 60% of median household income is the European Commission's official indicator of

being at risk of poverty. Many countries have seen an increase in single parents' poverty. Declines were observed in Ireland and the Netherlands (where we saw a strong rise in single parents' employment), and in recent years in the UK. By definition, the AROP rates based on the poverty threshold at 60% of median household income are higher than those at 50% or 40% of the median. In most countries, the trends in poverty are similar across the different indicators.

Yet, in some countries we observed that the AROP rate based on the 60% indicator was rising faster than the risk based on the 40% indicator. This suggests that while the number of single-parent households in poverty was rising, based on the official definition by the European Commission, the number of households living on extremely low incomes was not rising as quickly. This was the case in France, Germany, Sweden and the UK in the 1990s, for instance. The US stands out for having the highest single-parent family poverty rates, particularly based on the 40% indicator (see Casey & Maldonado, 2012).

In part related to facing higher poverty risks, single parenthood has been associated with disadvantaged socioeconomic wellbeing in various regards. Single parents are more likely to experience disadvantages in the labour market, which to an important extent are gendered (Sainsbury, 1999). Employment is not only part of the explanation of single parents' (lack of) economic wellbeing but also an important outcome in itself – providing independence, identity and an investment in skills and future opportunities, among other things. As the majority of single-parent households are headed by women, they are more likely to face lower wages and have less work experience and fewer career opportunities. Related to their often-limited financial means, single parents are more likely than coupled parents to experience material deprivation (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012). Single parents, often associated with their perceived role as welfare recipients, experience stigma (Duncan & Edwards, 1997; McCormack, 2004; Reutter et al., 2009). Their housing is more likely to be smaller, and housing costs put a larger burden on their financial budget (Bianchi, 1994; Rowlingson & McKay, 2002). Related to several of the aforementioned disadvantages, single parents experience relatively poor health (Benzeval, 1998; Burström et al., 2010) and mental wellbeing (Harkness, 2016). On average, children of single parents experience worse emotional wellbeing and disadvantaged cognitive development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Chapple, 2013; DiPrete & Eirich, 2006) and perform less well in school (de Lange et al., 2014; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

It is important to point out that the evidence summarised so far does not address explanations of lower levels of wellbeing associated with single parenthood, nor the complex interplay between various aspects of socioeconomic wellbeing. For instance, it does not clarify whether various aspects of children's wellbeing are associated with single parenthood as a family form as such, or by the poverty and material deprivation prevalent among single-parent families (Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). Also, many of these associations between single parenthood and risks of lower levels of wellbeing for single parents and their families have been established in studies focusing on single countries, not addressing contextual conditions and therefore forgoing the possible role labour markets and social policies can play. Figures 1.2 to 1.3 do show marked differences in the wellbeing of single parents across countries, suggesting that important lessons can be learned from how differences in resources, employment and policies affect their wellbeing. We turn to these issues in the next section.

The triple bind of single-parent families

Single-parent families face challenges that are constantly evolving: changes in single parenthood, changes in the labour markets in which they work and changes in the social policies that aim to address their needs. We refer to the challenges that arise from the combination of these developments as **the triple bind of single-parent families**: single parents and their families are disproportionately caught in the interplay between inadequacies in resources, employment and policies.

Inadequate resources

Single parents and their families lack the additional resources of a partner who lives in the household. The lack of a potential second earner makes it more difficult for single-parent households to have adequate earnings, but also makes the single-parent household more vulnerable to the consequences of (temporary) unemployment. Without a second caregiver in the household to fall back on, even if it is in the form of tag-team parenting, work-family conflict can be more pressing for single-parent families. In short, the absence of a partner living in the household limits care, income, time and flexibility. However, with single parenthood being more common in recent decades in many countries (as was shown in Figure 1.1), so have different forms of co-parenting. Increasingly, the 'other partner' (in the

vast majority of the cases the father) remains actively involved in the lives of their children, which represents an alternative way in which parental resources are provided. Research on how co-parenting affects single parents and their children is in its early stages, and results may vary across countries. However, early findings show promising results. In Sweden, children living in shared residence (that is, living for about equal time in both parents' homes) experience fewer psychosomatic problems and better wellbeing compared to children living with only a single parent (Bergström et al., 2013; 2015).

These findings are in line with evidence suggesting that lower levels of wellbeing among single parents and their children are not inherently associated with family composition, but rather – and to an important extent – with single parents' disadvantaged economic position (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001; Treanor, 2016). In the US, the literature has focused on the resources of single parents as diverging destinies: single parenthood has become increasingly common among those with fewer socioeconomic resources, such as the lower educated (McLanahan, 2004). Particularly in the US, this trend intersects with institutionalised racism, as children of color are more likely to be poor (Bratter & Damaske, 2013). McLanahan (2004) refers to single parents' lack of parental resources as them having lower levels of education and being younger and without a second caregiver. These resources, she argued, can often be inadequate to ensure their children's wellbeing. In addition to being an indicator of parental resources, education is a resource for employment and for better job qualities and earnings for the employed.

The diverging destinies thesis was demonstrated by longitudinal evidence for the US. However, the extent to which increasing socioeconomic divergence in single parenthood is universally observed across countries remains to be seen. For instance, Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) found that the educational gradient in divorce varied substantially across countries. Even though divorce is by no means the only pathway into single parenthood, these results suggest that the educational resources of single parents are more limited in the US than in some other countries. Other comparative studies have challenged diverging destinies and demonstrate that single parents' resources alone are not enough to understand changes in their wellbeing and that of their children. For instance, increases in educational disadvantage of single parents were found to have contributed only marginally to their disadvantage in the labour market and the educational disadvantage of their children (Bernardi & Boertien, 2017; Härkönen et al., 2016a). These examples point towards the importance of examining the

interplay between resources and the context provided by the labour market and social policy.

Inadequate employment

Employment is positively associated with wellbeing in ways that extend far beyond the earned income – particularly when supported to be possible, feasible and paying well (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001). It is associated with many beneficial outcomes, including reduced risks of poverty and material deprivation; investments in future employability; access to insurance-based social security and pensions; self-realisation; self-efficacy, social networks and health. Employment can be a resource, but it is given more weight as one of the three central challenges of the ‘triple bind’. Employment involves at least two actors – the employee and the employer – and often more when considering labour market institutions, regulations and unions.

As shown in Figure 1.2, employment rates among single parents tend to be fairly high across countries. Yet, in addition to their limited resources, there are at least two important reasons to believe that employment is less adequate for single parents than for other workers: gendered inequality and increasingly precarious employment conditions.

Gendered inequality in the labour market is very consequential for single parents. The gender wage gap – the result of factors that include occupational segregation, differences in human capital and working conditions, motherhood penalties, fatherhood premiums and discrimination – may have diminished somewhat but still puts women, particularly mothers, at a disadvantage in terms of earning adequate earnings (Duncan & Edwards, 1997; Goldin, 2014; Gornick, 2004; Halldén et al., 2016; Härkönen et al., 2016b). Part-time employment is still more common among women, for which they face a wage penalty in most countries (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008). Flexible working schedules, a potential strategy for dealing with work–family conflict, were found to benefit the wages of fathers over those of mothers (Lott & Chung, 2016). Even though this literature on the gender wage gap often does not explicitly differentiate between single parents and other family types, much of these inequalities resonate among women after they separate, and thus among single parents. Prior employment experience is an important resource for future employability. This, too, demonstrates how single parenthood is strongly gendered. Women not only make up the majority of single parents but are also substantially more likely to exit the labour market in association with motherhood

(Nieuwenhuis et al., 2012) than men are when they become fathers. This gendered inequality in employment resonates in the work experience women and men have after separation, and thus in the prior work experience single parents can bring to the labour market.

Labour markets have become more unequal and precarious (Kalleberg, 2009). This is partly driven by globalisation; skill-biased technological change; changes in pay norms; wages of the lower skilled under pressure, the rise of nonstandard work and high unemployment (Atkinson, 2015; Autor, 2014). Although research on the impact of the recent recession on work–life balance shows mixed results among those who are working (Lewis et al., 2017), there is little doubt that during this time economic inequality was on the rise in relation to employment and unemployment (OECD, 2015). Such inequalities result in welfare states struggling to keep up, underscoring the importance of not only redistribution but also ‘measures to render less unequal the incomes people receive before government taxes and transfers’ (Atkinson, 2015, p. 113). Not surprisingly, despite rising employment, poverty rates have not gone down (Cantillon, 2011; Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Marx et al., 2012; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2016). The rise of in-work poverty, to varying degrees across countries, shows that earnings from employment are more commonly inadequate in ensuring household incomes exceed the poverty threshold (Lohmann & Marx, 2018; Marx & Nolan, 2012). Single parents face in-work poverty more often than coupled parents, as dual earnership seems to be an increasingly necessary condition to secure economic wellbeing (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

In-work poverty is driven not only by low wages but also by employment conditions. Fixed-term contracts, particularly common among the young and low-skilled, are least likely to be renewed in times of economic downturn (Crettaz, 2013). Zero-hour contracts, low work intensity and temporary work all contribute to the precariousness of employment and the challenge to earn an adequate annual wage. Nonstandard working hours – including early, late and night shifts – are increasingly common in the ‘24/7 economy’ (Presser et al., 2008). Nonstandard working hours combined with childcare responsibilities have been especially challenging for single parents (Moilanen et al., 2016). Practices such as just-in-time scheduling (Boushey, 2016) only exacerbate such challenges.

Precarious working conditions pertain not only to inadequate earnings from employment and higher poverty risks but also to other important aspects of wellbeing, such as perceived job quality (Esser & Olsen, 2012) and work–family conflict (Ollier-Malaterre

& Foucreault, 2016). Work–family conflict reduced the subjective wellbeing of working mothers (Lewis et al., 2017; Matysiak et al., 2016; Roeters et al., 2016).

Inadequate policy

A variety of social policies have been documented to benefit the wellbeing of single parents, and often adequately so. Many studies have examined the impact of redistributive social policies on reducing the economic insecurity of single-parent families (Gornick & Jäntti, 2012; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2004). Child benefits were found to be effective in reducing single-parent poverty (Bradshaw & Finch, 2002; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015), particularly when their design is targeted towards single parents (Van Lancker et al., 2014). Childcare and housing costs have a sizeable impact on single parents' disposable household budget, particularly when they are on social assistance (Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999); policies can help compensate some of these costs. Poverty reduction can also be achieved by private transfers, such as alimonies, and by policies regulating and ensuring child support payments (Meyer et al., 2011; Skinner et al., 2007).

Financial transfers are by no means the only way to support single parents. A policy reform to expand public childcare subsidies in the US increased the employment of single mothers (Bainbridge et al., 2003; Blau & Robins, 1988). Single mothers receiving childcare subsidies were also more satisfied with the quality of the care their children received (Berger & Black, 1992). By facilitating employment, childcare reduces single-parent poverty (Misra et al., 2007). Parental leave may facilitate the employment of both current single parents of young children and of mothers prior to becoming a single parent, by helping them to maintain gainful employment later in life. Indeed, by facilitating single parents' employment, parental leave – if it is paid – was found to help reduce the poverty risks of single parents (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Still, even after accounting for the earnings from employment, family benefits were found to further reduce poverty risks of single parents – including among the employed (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2015). Countries with extensive work–family policies and welfare policies have better education outcomes for children living in single-parent families (Hampden-Thompson & Pong, 2005). Both work–family policies (such as parental leave) and financial support policies (such as family allowances and tax benefits to single parents) were found to reduce the performance gap in science and maths between children of single parents and coupled parents (Pong et al., 2003).

Yet, despite these many examples of how social policy adequately benefits the wellbeing of single parents and their children, current and ongoing developments in social policy need to be critically addressed. Facing budget constraints, welfare states develop new strategies to maintain performance at adequate levels, while responding to the labour market and so-called ‘new social risks’, which include (among other risks) the rise of single parenthood (Bonoli, 2013; Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014). This prompted the adoption of ‘active’ social policies that seek to achieve welfare provision by facilitating employment. This includes active labour market programmes, including job-search assistance, public employment and training programmes (Card et al., 2010; Kluve, 2010). The turn towards activation was also observed in policies tailored specifically to single parents (Carcillo & Grubb, 2006; Knijn et al., 2008). Closely related is the notion of social investment. Diagnosing unemployment as a mismatch between skills and jobs, the social investment perspective emphasises the importance of policies that promote education and training, facilitate employment and invest in children’s early education and wellbeing. It seeks to *prepare* individuals for economic independence, rather than to *repair* their situation of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion (Morel et al., 2012). This has materialised in an emphasis on policies providing in-kind services that seek to stimulate employment to reduce poverty, so that poverty reduction would become less reliant on policies that transfer income to families in need. Yet, in correspondence with the increasing emphasis on activation, social assistance levels declined in most countries in the 1990s, with more diverse trends in the 2000s (Cantillon et al., 2016). Social assistance levels were found to be inadequate to reach commonly accepted poverty thresholds in most European countries (Nelson, 2013).

It remains to be seen to what extent the social investment perspective on social policy making, with the emphasis on stimulating employment rather than providing cash transfers, will result in policy solutions that are adequate for single parents. On the one hand, the emphasis on facilitating employment – through either education and training skills, or policies to improve job searching and reduce work–family barriers – may be especially beneficial to single parents, with their limited resources. Indeed, many of the policies that are promoted by the ‘new spending’ in the social investment perspective, including childcare, effectively reduce poverty for single parents (Vaalavuo, 2013).

Yet, on the other hand, social investment strategies may further intensify persistent and pre-existing inequalities associated with single parenthood (Pintelon et al., 2013). As social investment strategies focus

on employment, and single-parent employment is often inadequate, improving single parents' wellbeing based on such strategies may not be an easy task. For instance, even though active labour market policies were found to be associated with higher employment among single parents in Germany, France, Sweden and the UK, their poverty rates were not reduced (Jaehrling et al., 2014). The 'trilemma of activation' holds that it is impossible to simultaneously reduce the need for cash transfer policies by stimulating employment, avert overly intrusive policy administration and monitoring, and ensure that the unemployed are not poor (Cantillon, 2011; Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Vandenbroucke & Vleminckx, 2011). Benefits of activation were found to be unequal, benefiting those with more resources (Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011), and transfers were found to benefit the poor more than in-kind services (Verbist & Matsaganis, 2014). Such so-called Matthew effects of social policy, in which policy efforts disproportionately benefit the relatively well off and thus do not reach those with the least resources (Merton, 1936), are pervasive in social policy initiatives that fail to account for pre-existing inequalities (Pintelon et al., 2013).

Social policies can be considered inadequate related to various design characteristics that include generosity, means testing, the distinction between contributory and noncontributory benefits, and conditions of eligibility and conditionality (Roll, 1992). This can be in isolation of other factors; for instance, when public daycare is unavailable or its quality is not guaranteed, or when benefit levels are inadequate to lift families out of poverty (Nelson, 2013). Programmes can be so complicated that take-up is reduced (Kleven & Kopczuk, 2011; Van Oorschot, 1991). The scarce available estimates of take-up rates in OECD countries show that as few as 40%–80% of those entitled to social assistance and housing programmes, and 60–80% of those entitled to unemployment compensation, actually receive those benefits (Hernanz et al., 2004). Take-up of social assistance benefits has been on the decline (Riphahn, 2001). Policies are shaped by the assumptions held by policy makers (Daly, 2011; Lewis, 1992) and street-level bureaucrats implementing the policies (Evans, 2016; Lipsky, 2010). Inadequacy of policies can arise when these assumptions no longer correspond to the reality of resources and employment. For instance, a review of child support policies across countries showed how the design of these policies struggled to keep up with increasing family complexity (Meyer et al., 2011). This means that these policies were rendered inadequate to ensure children's standard of living in an increasing number of families. Social policies are often based

on gendered assumptions regarding the division of labour within the household (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001) – as is evident in, for instance, the male breadwinner model (Korpi, 2000; Lewis, 1992). The social investment paradigm was described as hiding, or even taking for granted, ‘gender inequalities in both the household and the labour market’ (Saraceno, 2011, p. 257), underrepresenting the value of care and the costs of children. This could disadvantage those families in which the number of children is high relative to the number of earners, as in single-parent households. While promoting the dual-earner model, it falls short on supporting a dual-carer model. In terms of accumulation of work experience, this resonates with the (gendered) disadvantages women have in the labour market.

Binding it together

Resources, employment and policy are all consequential for single-parent wellbeing, in isolation and (particularly) in relation to each other. We refer to these relationships as the triple bind of single-parent families. A **double bind** is often described as ‘a situation in which a person is confronted with two irreconcilable demands or a choice between two undesirable courses of action’ (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). Take, for instance, the work–family conflict in which employers and family responsibilities can pose irreconcilable demands on single parents. This is not to say that coupled-parent families do not face any challenges in combining work and family responsibilities, but that single parents have even fewer degrees of freedom to negotiate such work–family conflict. A low level of education can be regarded as irreconcilable – or, more broadly defined, incompatible – with the demands apparent in a given employment regime. Policy, one of the three parts of the triple bind, can also implicitly or explicitly express demands or expectations. Welfare states expressing the demand to avoid poverty through gainful employment, facilitating this through employment services rather than through redistribution, assume that workers’ resources and labour market conditions are both adequate to secure economic wellbeing. If such assumptions are not met, single parents are particularly likely to find themselves in the midst of a triple bind of not having the adequate resources required to find employment that is adequate to provide economic wellbeing, while benefit levels are inadequate as well, because those were reduced based on the assumption that facilitating employment would be sufficient to reduce poverty. As a second example, a public childcare policy that seeks to reduce work–family conflict can still be inadequate to single

parents, if the price is too high compared to their resource levels, or if the opening hours or daycare centres are incompatible with the nonstandard or long working hours an employer might demand from a single parent (Moilanen et al., 2016; Saraceno, 2011).

The combined focus on the resources of single-parent families, their employment and social policy is not uncommon in analyses of social policy. Indeed, many welfare state regimes have been based on the ‘triangle of states, markets and families’ (Béland & Mahon, 2016, p. 37). Yet, the concept of the triple bind is incompatible with approaches based on welfare regime typologies for several reasons. The often-used distinction between social democratic, conservative and liberal welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) was argued to be based on a ‘conglomerate’ of welfare state generosity, programme characteristics and outcomes, rendering typologies inadequate for causal analyses (Korpi, 2000, p. 141). Related to this, typologies are unable to examine contradictions or synergies between specific policies. Another reason is that typologies are insensitive to analysing change, whereas the triple bind explicitly addresses changes in single parents’ resources, employment conditions and social policy entitlements. Finally, it remains an empirical question whether welfare regime types accurately represent the position of single parents. For instance, working single parents in the UK had lower poverty and access to generous family benefits, which contradicts the liberal welfare state associated with limited state intervention (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

‘Inadequate’ here refers to the degree to which the combination of single parents’ resources, employment and policies facilitates their positive socioeconomic wellbeing. These inadequacies are not exclusive to single parents; yet, the triple bind represents a combination of factors that is widespread among single-parent families – and increasingly so. When these three factors add up, they limit single parents’ agency – their capability to ‘be and do’ (Hobson, 2011; Sen, 1992).

Outline of this book

This book brings together expert scholars on single parents, labour market research and social policy to study various aspects of the triple bind of single-parent families. The aim is to contribute to research on single parents’ socioeconomic wellbeing on five accounts. First, the triple bind explicitly acknowledges that single parents form a very diverse group. Part of this diversity is captured by a wide range of resources and employment conditions, which interact with how they are supported by social policy. In that, second, the concept of the

triple bind of single-parent families is inherently contextual. Rather than merely looking at single parents' resources, the context in which these resources shape their wellbeing is accounted for explicitly. As such, many of the analyses in this book are comparative. Third, the analyses explicitly bring into focus the role of employment in shaping single parents' wellbeing. Fourth, the policy analyses focus on in-kind services and institutions that affect the employment of single parents, without losing focus of policies that are based on redistribution. Finally, the analyses look beyond poverty as an indicator of wellbeing, and instead examine the socioeconomic wellbeing of single parents and their families based on a wide range of indicators. Importantly, this allows for examining how the economic inequality associated with single parenthood affects other aspects of their wellbeing and that of their families.

Part 1: Adequate resources

Part 1 takes a closer look at single parents' resources, the first two chapters focusing on education, poverty and wealth in single-parent households and the latter four on how these resources affect the wellbeing of their children. Härkönen (Chapter Two) examines the link between the educational disadvantage of single mothers and their poverty risks across countries, effectively revisiting the 'diverging destinies' thesis in international comparative perspective. The results indicate that the educational disadvantage of single mothers is not the 'smoking gun' explaining their increased poverty risks (compared to coupled-parent families); rather, this explanation is to be found in countries' inequality in poverty risks between all lower and all higher educated. Taking a different look at economic resources, Sierminska (Chapter Three) is among the first to study the wealth of single parents. She finds substantial wealth gaps between single-parent and coupled-parent families. Yet, she discusses, while single parents have a greater need for (at least some) wealth accumulation to cover income shocks, their capabilities for doing so are often impaired by housing regimes and means-tested social policies.

The next chapters demonstrate the importance of adequate resources for various aspects of the wellbeing of children growing up with a single parent. Treanor (Chapter Four) acknowledges that single parenthood is often a transitional phase, and uses a dynamic life-course perspective to study the wellbeing of children of single mothers. She finds that the lower wellbeing of such children is determined by the volatility in work intensity, duration of income poverty and increasing levels of

material deprivation (as mothers are single for a longer period of time), rather than by single parenthood or changing family formation as such. Harkness and Salgado (Chapter Five) examine the disadvantage of children in single-parent families with respect to their cognitive and emotional development, and how the impact of separation varies across children's life course. As single parenthood became more common in the UK, they report, this disadvantage grew, in large part related to their parents' increasingly disadvantaged socioeconomic resources. Examining educational performance, de Lange and Dronkers (Chapter Six) present cross-national evidence that children growing up with a single parent perform less well in school, particularly when attending a school with many other children growing up with a single parent. This disadvantage could be explained by the socioeconomic resources of their parents and schools. Fransson, Låftman, Östberg and Bergström (Chapter Seven) further examine various dimensions of the wellbeing of children growing up in single-parent families in Sweden. They find that children whose parents decide on shared residence as a form of parental resource experience wellbeing that is nearly on par with that of children growing up with coupled parents.

Part 2: Adequate employment

Part 2 of the book examines how policies and institutions facilitate employment that is adequate for single parents to achieve wellbeing. Zigel and Hübgen (Chapter Eight) start off by developing a framework to analyse policy outcomes for single parents from a life-course perspective. This life-course perspective is shown to be consequential for various conditions of eligibility of social policy, and important to show how single parents' resources develop at different points in their life course. Horemans and Marx (Chapter Nine) zoom in on determinants of labour market participation of single parents, and which policies facilitate them to have jobs that provide adequate earnings to avoid poverty. The results suggest that merely looking at how financial transfers affect the income situation of single parents misses the point that their position in the income distribution prior to redistribution is also determined by income transfers and the work (dis)incentives they may bring.

Byun (Chapter Ten) shows that countries with low poverty rates for single parents are not necessarily the same countries with a large share of single-parent families in the middle class. Single parents were more likely to have a middle-class income in countries with paid parental leave and union coverage. Looking at how using paid parental leave

schemes and formal childcare services affects later-in-life employment of single mothers, Van Lancker (Chapter Eleven) compares European countries to test whether cultural or institutional explanations are able to account for cross-country differences in the use and take-up of these policies. He concludes that work–family reconciliation policies help sustain employment among single mothers, but for these expectations to materialise, single mothers need to be able to actually use these policies. Duvander and Korsell (Chapter Twelve) complement this with a case study on Sweden, which targets a comparatively large share of parental leave towards fathers. They examine the extent to which mothers and fathers (continue to) share their parental leave after they separate, showing how the Swedish parental leave policy stimulates and facilitates fathers to be involved in the care of their children after separation.

Many of the chapters so far have shown the importance of adequate employment in securing single parents' economic wellbeing. Esser and Olsen (Chapter Thirteen) focus on how institutional contexts facilitate employed single parents to obtain the employment security and work–family balance that match their preferences. Matching tends to be more extensive in countries with longer unemployment benefits, stronger unions, more extensive active labour market programmes and family policies promoting more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work. However, institutions matter selectively for different parental groups, where single parents tend to be at a disadvantage. Nieuwenhuis, Tøge and Palme (Chapter Fourteen) describe the health penalty of single parents across Europe, and examine under which policy conditions employment is associated with better health for single parents. They report that although active labour market policies and public childcare benefit the health of employed single parents, redistributive policies are still required to protect the health of those who are not employed. Such redistributive policies are the focus of Part 3.

Part 3: Adequate redistributive policies

Most policies analysed so far improve the wellbeing of single parents by facilitating their employment and improving the adequacy of that employment. Part 3 examines redistributive policies. Bradshaw, Keung and Chzhen (Chapter Fifteen) examine the role family cash benefits play in reducing poverty among single parents with different levels of earnings, and compare this impact to other financial transfers, such as housing benefits. The results demonstrate the continued importance of financial support policies for single-parent families, with family

benefits being particularly crucial in reducing poverty among children living in single-parent families. Morissens (Chapter Sixteen) examines the policy design of child benefits and revisits the debate on whether these policies are more effective when their design is universal or targeted to single parents. Despite the finding of a stratification effect of universal family benefits being slightly better in bringing coupled-parent families out of poverty compared to single-parent families, she concludes that universal family benefits have an important impact on the alleviation of poverty for single-parent families. Eydal (Chapter Seventeen) applies the triple bind to examine the extent to which the Icelandic welfare system has supported single parents by providing adequate resources and employment in order to create possibilities for both parents to earn and care. This case study shows that while the Icelandic policies do provide important support to single parents, they do not adequately ensure that single parents have the same possibilities as coupled parents to balance work and family and ensure their families' economic wellbeing.

In the final empirical chapter, Cantillon, Collado and Van Mechelen (Chapter Eighteen) report that minimum income protection schemes for single parents in developed welfare states fall short of the poverty threshold, and that this inadequacy is of a *structural* nature. Gross wages for working single parents fell increasingly short of countries' poverty thresholds; as a result, it seems impossible to successfully combine adequate minimum income packages for working and nonworking single parents on the one hand and reasonable incentives to work on the other, without increasing welfare state efforts.

Part 4: Reflections and conclusion

In the final part of the book, Calder (Chapter Nineteen) explores how single parents fit into current debates about social justice, the family and children. Separating disadvantage from injustice, he argues that single-parent families are disproportionately likely to be on the receiving end of injustices that tend to be symptomatic of wider forms of inequality – particularly in income and wealth. Taking a critical perspective, he concludes that as well as all the costs of single parenthood we should accommodate the positives and avoid the assumption of a deficit model: a childhood spent in a single-parent family is as rich and precious as any other.

Gornick (Chapter Twenty) discusses how the gendered nature of single parenthood is baked into the triple-bind framework and reflects on four things that matter for single parents: *definitions* that disaggregate

single parents, *income* (but also going beyond income), *single parenting for children* (although causal mechanisms remain poorly understood) and *cash transfers* (but also other policy tools).

The book ends with Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (Chapter Twenty-one) pointing out directions for future research and formulating five key lessons from the book to improve the wellbeing of single parents and their families: 1) inequality matters for diverse aspects of single parents' wellbeing; 2) policies that benefit all families matter just as well for single-parent families; 3) gender, involved fathers and support for shared parenting matter; 4) investments in employment matter to support inclusive societies; yet 5) reasons for concern remain, and they matter.

Notes

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- ² Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 are based on the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) Database. Single-parent households were identified using the HHTYPE variable, defining single parents as households in which one parent lives with their dependent child (at least one child under the age of 18). Data were restricted to households in which the household head was aged between 20 and 55. We used the LIS equivalence scale, equal to the square root of the household size (using this scale allowed for greater time coverage than the modified OECD scale due to data availability).

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