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Between Stigmatisation and Survival: Poverty among Migrant and Non-migrant Lone Mothers in the Netherlands

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Remarkable as it may seem for one of the richest welfare states in the world, lone mothers in the Netherlands run a high risk of poverty. Though they may be entitled to social housing and benefits, their allowances are often too low to get by. Yet material deprivation is not the only challenge that lone mothers face. Poverty has many social and cultural dimensions, and for lone mothers this may mean that they are doubly stigmatised: as lone mothers who do not form a household with a man and as welfare recipients who supposedly take advantage of society.

The Netherlands is increasingly becoming a multicultural society with a growing migrant population. This is reflected in the fact that lone mothers are not a homogeneous group. They have diverse cultural backgrounds. This chapter is based on qualitative interviews with almost 70 lone mothers who lived in Amsterdam at the end of the 1990s. They were low skilled and received a welfare allowance or an income from work at the social minimum level (Ypeij, 2009). My sample comprised black lone mothers who migrated to the Netherlands from Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles and white, 'autochthonous' mothers who were born in the Netherlands.[1] While cultural differences among the women are noteworthy, and relate both to their access to social support and some practices of stigmatisation, the women share a class position and – in instances where they were married or cohabited with a man – experiences of dominant or even violent relationships with ex-husbands and boyfriends.

Everyday experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination
Lone mothers have a vulnerable position in Dutch society, especially when they have little education. Public childcare facilities are inadequate for which reason lone mothers are often forced to work in part-time jobs. While low-skilled jobs available to them pay little, women on benefits also have many difficulties making ends meet and as welfare recipients they are subject to severe scrutiny and bureaucratic control. In the 1990s, with the aim of cutting back on expenditure, many Western welfare states implemented welfare reforms along the neoliberal lines (Kingfisher, 2002). For the Netherlands, this means that the alleviation of poverty through raising benefits has become a political taboo: access to benefits is increasingly limited and fraud prevention has become ever more important. In the daily practice of accessing and administering welfare, women respondents were confronted with severe practices of stigmatisation and discrimination. Standard benefit entitlement is based on the economic situation of the married or cohabiting couple. Although single women (and men) have independent access to benefits, fraud prevention requires social sector officials to repeatedly interrogate women about their household composition and love lives. The policy is to visit every lone mother on

benefits at least once to make sure that she is not living with a boyfriend and receiving her benefits undeservingly. Needless to say, the women experienced all this as a very intrusive and unwelcome interference in their private lives. This situation was aggravated by the fact that the Social Services' employees are not always very polite towards lone mothers. They openly question their integrity and often think of them as fraudulent clients who got pregnant in order to obtain benefits and who are solely driven by their wish to profit from society. An employee (who was married) of the Social Services told me:

> Those mothers think they can have children and that they are automatically entitled to benefits. I have children myself, but I do not bother society with them. To have children is my own, private decision. But it happens more and more. Those women have a child and think that society should take care of them.

Lone mothers' benefits can be jeopardised by such discriminatory attitudes and several mothers interviewed had to engage in lengthy legal battles to get what they were entitled to. Prejudiced government bureaucrats do not stand alone in their condemnation of lone mothers. Against the dominant discourse of the nuclear family, lone mothers are considered incomplete and sexually unfulfilled women. As young single women on benefits their love lives become of interest to the entire society. Many people think that lone mothers (and other people on benefits) live off taxpayers' money. If a woman becomes pregnant without having a stable relationship with a man, she should have an abortion instead of burdening society with her benefit claim. If she is divorced, there is still no reason to burden society with it. Why does she not find a job? Children are very much considered to be a private matter for which society in general should not be held responsible. Many neighbours are willing to spy on lone mothers. If a lone mother is seen regularly in the company of a man, she might be cohabiting and her benefits may be improperly received. An anonymous telephone call to the 'snitch line' is viewed as desirable public duty. It will help all taxpayers and prevent the further moral decay of society.

Divergent notions of motherhood and household formation
All the lone mothers in my research experienced stigmatisation and they often complained about their financial difficulties, humiliation and stress. Nevertheless, they did not perceive themselves to be victims. They did their utmost to deal with their situation and were creative in making ends meet (Edin and Lein, 1997; Ypeij, 2009). An important resource for them was their social networks. All women received material, practical and emotional support from family and friends which often implies substantial financial assistance. Nevertheless, a comparison between Afro-Surinamese, Curaçaoan and autochthonous women shows that their networks functioned differently and that this was related to notions of motherhood and family formation. The ways Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan women organised their family life shows many characteristics of the so-called matrifocal family system which is common in their places of origin. In this system lone motherhood and female-headed households are frequent phenomena and men may have a more marginal role as husbands and fathers. The vast majority of the Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan respondents had never lived together with a man or if they did, then only for a short period. None of them had been married. Nevertheless, to refer to these women as single or lone mothers is rather ethnocentric because of the sharing of parenting and childcare with their female kin. My interviews show that female family members feel

responsible for each other's children and that reciprocal exchange of social support was accepted without question. The women mentioned daughters, cousins, sisters, mothers, aunts and close girlfriends as their main sources of support. A Curaçaoan mother of two described the support she received: 'We help each other, my family and me. My aunt calls me before she goes shopping. My cousin babysits for me. The four of us form a unit: my aunt, my sister, myself and my cousin. If one of us has a problem, we get together. That's how we live.'

Among the autochthonous, white interviewees and their social networks the nuclear family household was given much more importance as the best place to raise children. Forming a household with the father of the children was considered a normal and good thing to do and most interviewed women had been married or lived together with a man in the past. Parenthood was perceived as a deliberate and planned decision. One should only become a mother when the conditions are perfect. In this context, lone motherhood may be considered as something exceptional and a deviation from norms. An interviewee became pregnant when she was 17 despite using contraceptives. This was bad enough, but there was not even a reliable boyfriend around to take care of her. Because she did not want an abortion, her family and friends considered her lone motherhood to be her own fault and did not feel involved. Consequently, the woman received hardly any support from them. Another woman was married to an illegal immigrant from Egypt and had two children with him. He walked out on her the moment he got a residence permit. Her divorce weakened her ties with her family: 'They all think I'm a stupid so-and-so, because I fell for him. They had all warned me: "You can not trust those filthy foreigners." They told me this would happen and now I'd better solve my problems myself.' This does not mean that the autochthonous interviewees did not receive any help at all, but support was often accompanied by either explicit or implicit messages about the women's exceptional situation, their wrongdoing and their failure. In other words, their social networks were offering support while simultaneously stigmatising the women.

Also the flexibility of the boundaries between households is conducive to reciprocal social support (Stack, 1974). The matrifocal households of the Curaçaoan and Afro-Surinamese mothers were much more open entities than those of the autochthonous women (see also Momsen, Chapter 18, this volume; Safa, Chapter 17, this volume). Within the autochthonous nuclear family system domestic units are isolated, fixed and closed. In the overwhelming majority of cases, after their divorce or separation, the interviewed autochthonous women formed a domestic unit exclusively with their children and these units had a far more static composition than those of their Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan counterparts. The autochthonous adult siblings of the interviewed women may relate to their sister in a friendly manner, but the exchange of financial support among them is more an exception than a rule. They are raised by the same parents, the reasoning goes, and all had the same opportunities to become financially independent. If one of them has not succeeded in this respect, it is that person's own fault and responsibility. This contrasts rather sharply with the flexible, spontaneous and matter-of-course way of giving and receiving among female kin of the Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan women, who feel a strong sense of responsibility towards each other and a willingness to help. Family members, who belong to different households, may form extra-domestic networks (Stack, 1974). An Afro-Surinamese woman with three children explained: 'My

mum gives me her debit card. She knows that I will repay any money I withdraw. Her money is my money, and my money is her money; that is how it works.'

The majority of the migrant women had lived in an extended household in the past or did so at the time of the interviews. These households were often formed with the aim of helping somebody out, whether with temporary lodging, childcare responsibilities, or paying off debts.

A new husband? No way!

Though the cultural differences regarding family systems and related reciprocal exchange relations between the black and white women are unmistakable, in their dealings with their boyfriends, ex-husbands and the fathers of their children, the women were more unified. The vast majority of them rejected the idea of forming a household with a male anew. They felt that they were better off without a man in the house. In cases where the women had lived together with a man in the past, often gender inequalities and power relations had been a major issue. But also the women who had never lived together with a man, who were mostly the Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan women, could explain perfectly well all the disadvantages of cohabitation.

Gender inequalities and male domination are manifest in various ways, the most obvious being male violence against women. Another manifestation is the gendered division of labour in which women carry considerably more responsibility for caring and household tasks than men. This implies a lot of work for women and a limitation of their personal freedom. A man in the house often means additional work on top of an already exhausting work schedule (see also Chant, Chapter 15, this volume). A third manifestation of gender inequalities is that men may control intrahousehold money flows, which they frequently do, as evidenced in men deciding how much they will give to their wives and girlfriends for the maintenance of the domestic unit. Men may also spend money on themselves in an irresponsible way, or try to control or claim the money of their wives and girlfriends, and demand that the latter account for their expenses. A man in the house may accordingly mean loss of control over finances that are often already stretched to the limit. After divorce or separation, in many cases the women are still not freed from male domination. Through maintenance payments, ex-husbands and ex-boyfriends may try to exercise power over their former wives and girlfriends. Therefore, many women reject maintenance in order to preserve their independence (see also Chant, 1997).

Based on their negative experiences with marriage and cohabitation, a substantial majority of the interviewed women, irrespective of their cultural background, said that they did not want to cohabit with a man anymore (for comparable conclusions about Costa Rica and the Philippines, see Chant, 2007, and on the United States, see Edin and Kefalas, 2005). Although the women's cultural notion on family formation may diverge, all the women shared a comparable discourse on the advantages of living without a husband or boyfriend. It is important to realise that the men in their lives were often men with little education, who were either unemployed, had unstable, low-paying jobs or, as migrants, were discriminated against (see also McIlwaine, Chapter 39, this volume). The marriage market in which these women were active did not give them access to men from the middle class who could offer them financial stability. Instead they were often dating and marrying lower-class men who had a marginalised position in the labour market, and thus were poor, or made a living in an illegal way. Compared with that of

men, the position of the women themselves, as lone mothers in a welfare state, was more stable. Although they had little education, had limited access to the job market and were poor, their income and housing were relatively secure because of their benefits and the government's social housing policies. The women's statements about preferring to live alone should therefore be seen in the light of their class position in a welfare society, and that of their potential boyfriends and husbands. If a man cannot bring in money, his dominant behaviour is felt as even more unacceptable. On the other hand, for the men, the women are an attractive party. According to some of the interviewed women men are consciously searching for women who receive benefits and have a house or an apartment. It is not so much love and attraction that leads these men to make passes at women, as the fact that they do not have a roof over their own heads. The women regard this behaviour as the betrayal and misuse of women.

> The men who live in this neighbourhood [Amsterdam Southeast] look for a woman with a house. If a woman has a house, then they move in. They move in for the house. And they do not want to contribute any money. That is why I want to live alone with my two kids. (Curaçaoan women, aged 33, with two children)

It was not without reason that some women yearned for a rich man because that would really make a difference.

Between stigmatisation and survival
The women interviewed experienced gender inequality and stigmatisation on several counts in their everyday lives. The lack of public childcare in combination with the low level of their welfare allowance condemns them to poverty. Social services employees, family members and neighbours may stigmatise them as single mothers or as welfare recipients and their love lives may become subject to bureaucratic questioning, scrutiny and control. Yet despite their stigmatisation for being single and on welfare, they reject the idea of forming a household with a man. The same Dutch welfare state that condemns the women to poverty offers them an escape route from male domination. As singles, the women have independent access to housing and benefits, however low their income level. These benefits allow them to stand up for themselves and become independent from men. The majority of the respondents wish to stay single and reject the meagre advantages offered by marriage or cohabitation. These women's striving for independence and gender equality is an expression of their agency. Even if their benefit dependence may lead to poverty and stigmatisation, they may still be able to survive, and prefer survival on the margins to marriage and male domination (see also Chant, 1997).

In the case of the Afro-Surinamese and Curaçaoan women these findings may not be too surprising when cast in the light of long-standing matrifocal values that the women appreciate and the social support they so matter of factly exchange with each other.

In the case of the autochthonous, white women who endured stigmatisation even in their most intimate social networks and in such a way that it could cut off social and psychological support, these findings are remarkable to say the least. They are not only an indication of the women's self-worth and the strength of their wish for independence, but also of how unhappy they must have felt in the marriages they have left behind.

Note

1. I use the term 'autochthonous' for the white Netherlands-born lone mothers because I consider this more suitable than the terms 'indigenous' or 'native' which often indicate minorities or excluded groups in certain geographical regions. Besides this, the term autochthonous is widely used in the Netherlands.

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