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EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

The Rise of Single Motherhood in the EU: Analysis and Propositions

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This paper will address a rising issue within the EU – the increase of single parent families. Firstly, we will draw a general picture of the disadvantages faced by single parents and outline the possible causes of this phenomenon. Secondly, we will attempt to sketch possible alternative solutions that could inspire policymakers at the national and European levels. Both in our analysis and recommendations, we will put a particular emphasis on the dynamic role played by norms and representations.

that of single mothers. This issue has inspired a significant number of academic investigations and analyses that have highlighted the individual and collective difficulties related to this phenomenon. Not only are single mothers on the rise, but their situation is in many ways more problematic than that of other women. Indeed, single mothers are more likely to fall into poverty (their risk of poverty is 30%, compared to 17% for couples with children), to be unemployed, to have taken a part-time job in order to combine professional and family life, to have poorer physical and mental health – the rate of depression is particularly high among single mothers – and to have difficulties in building lasting new relationships.

The Sacrificial Dimension of Motherhood

The causes usually advanced to explain the increase in single motherhood are diverse.

For some, the rise in single motherhood is due to a problematic abandonment of traditional family values. This thesis is relatively fashionable, even beyond strictly conservative circles. According to this theory, the increase in individualism – equated to sheer selfishness – and the loss of traditional values and beliefs in

UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON

Single parenthood is on the rise everywhere in the world, including the EU. Single parents now constitute about 19% of the households with children in the EU. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this phenomenon concerns women. Only 15% of single parents are fathers, and their socioeconomic condition is better than

religion, in marriage and the institution of the family, has caused the destruction of the family unit. This is supposed to have inflated the rate of divorces and separations and also created the phenomenon of single mothers. This thinking is usually informed by a traditional view of gender roles – in which women are expected to be defined and define themselves through their potential or effective status as mothers rather than as individuals. Yet, if the tendency of a majority of relationships to last less long than some decades ago is indeed partly due to a change in representations as well as to a relative socioeconomic emancipation of women, this is not a deplorable evolution as such. The willingness shared by an increasing number of individuals to find a self-fulfillment in relationships that goes beyond social obligations is a positive trend from the point of view of individual freedom. And we can only wish that new models compatible with the needs of couples as well as children will emerge, which will take into account the high expectations entailed in the contemporary view of relationships – combining love, desire, intimacy, friendship, trust and mutual support – and the necessity to balance private and professional lives.

So even if one can agree with part of the above, one has to go against the normative conclusions often drawn from it. In other words: the solution to the plight of single mothers is not to dissuade couples from breaking up or to incite single women to find any new possible partner. Individuals, whether they are male or female, must have the right and the possibility to leave relationships when they are not fulfilled by them. This is all the more important for women since until only a few decades ago, most of them were legally and economically dependent on their husbands. Nowadays, Western women are equal legal subjects to men, whether they are married or not, and are often able to earn a living on their own. Besides, legislation against

domestic violence has become much stricter, enabling women to leave abusive relationships more easily. Even if freedom does not necessarily equate happiness – one can indeed question the compatibility between short term relationships and long term personal happiness – this is not up to politics to solve such dilemmas. And the increase in individual freedom in relationships should be seen as a general progress.

Nonetheless, the demise of the traditional family does not mean that social norms on gender have disappeared. Mothers are still expected to bear the biggest burden of parenthood, whether in a relationship or after a separation. Not only is motherhood still supposed to define women's main identity, but it is still very much associated with ideas of sacrifice, total dedication and altruism. This very unrealistic ideal only leads to women feeling guilty when they do not meet such high expectations. They also explain why, when partners split up, most mothers cannot even contemplate the possibility of having only secondary custody of their children. They fear that if they do, they will be perceived as abnormal and bad mothers. And in practice, the few mothers who make that choice do seem to be very badly judged by society.

In general, these expectations also push mothers to sacrifice many of their own needs to their children. For instance, some will stay in violent relationships in order to avoid disrupting their children's lives, or accept part-time work even if they love their career, renounce passions and hobbies to remain at home, perhaps even not apply for high-status positions so that they can dedicate more time to their family... In the case of single mothers, this spirit of sacrifice will have specific consequences: they will often try and work more because of a lack of resources, but this will make them feel incredibly guilty since they feel that they are contradicting this dominant vision of motherhood. They will have to give up their leisure, hobbies and passions in

order to spend time with their children. If they have the means to afford extra childcare, they will often not rely on it too much out of fear of neglecting their children. This is, of course, aggravated by the fact that children raised by single mothers tend to suffer from the lack of investment from the father and can therefore develop behavioural problems or trouble at school.

Therefore, if the traditional couple and family are much less dominant in practice, some of the norms associated to these models are still prevailing, particularly concerning motherhood. A certain equalisation of rights and aspirations partly explain the rise of divorces and separations. But the fact that the care of children still mainly relies on women – whether in a couple or separated – shows that traditional gender expectations are far from having totally subsided.

A more agnostic Approach to Gender Stereotypes

However, even if we acknowledge the existence of dominant norms on motherhood and the way they tend to justify or reinforce particular disadvantages lived by women, this does not mean that gender stereotypes are the actual cause of such disadvantages. The causal link often postulated between these stereotypes and inequalities between women and men is still impossible to prove (or disprove). First of all, if it is possible to identify very general prevailing ideas about the ‘feminine’ and the ‘masculine’, it seems more arduous to establish a clear and detailed list of these norms – all the more so since they appear to vary in time and space. Yet, without being able to clarify exactly what these stereotypes are, it seems difficult to potentially trace – and even harder to measure – their impact on preferences and behaviours.

Secondly, abiding by the idea that these clichés do exist – even if we cannot describe them in

accurate detail – does not at all prove that they are causal factors for potential differences between the sexes beyond pure biology. They could also very well be a mere reflection of deeper and innate distinctions: this is the argument held by most essentialists, who do not deny the existence of stereotypes but simply attribute them to more fundamental differences between the sexes. For instance, broad clichés on motherhood would, in that view, simply reflect deeper innate characteristics related to the feminine. Of course, constructivists can always reply that stereotypes are too changeable across time and space to simply emanate from essential biological differences. However, if this stress on variety does indeed prove the socially constructed dimension of at least part of those stereotypes, it does not prove their actual impact on behaviour and mentalities.

Thirdly, most attempts to use science to back up this causal link between gender norms and attitudes or opinions are likely to fail for another reason: since we are all imbued with dominant visions of gender – and researchers are no exception – it is very problematic to detach ourselves from these norms in order to see the possible link between them and actual behaviour and mentality. This argument has been used by constructivists to underline the lack of validity of numerous experiments brought to the fore by essentialists, but it could very equally be used against the latter. And it has very direct consequences on the relative efficacy of discourses on gender: since most people – men and women alike – firmly believe in the existence of differences between the sexes, any approach attempting to radically deny this is bound to fail at convincing a majority of people – including women.

A final argument complicates the matter even further: the discovery of brain plasticity and the ‘epigenetics revolution’ have shown that behavioural and cognitive changes are not merely superficial and social but can also lead to

actual biological changes, even very early in life. Therefore, if stereotypes have an impact on social differences between the sexes, this also ends up having a biological dimension. In other words: biological traits are not necessarily innate but can also be a result of socialisation. To look for biological differences or deny them, as many researchers do in a bid to settle this debate between the innate and the constructed, is therefore not very useful. Biology (brain structure, genes, hormones) is as much the reflection of innate factors as it is the result of socialisation. And if we can indeed show that stereotypes have an impact on behaviour and biology, we cannot clearly separate what is, in biology and behaviour, the result of innate or socially constructed elements.

The only way to ever identify a list of purely constructed stereotypes on gender would be to raise children of both sexes totally outside society and compare their behaviours in adulthood. Of course, this is not possible in liberal societies. We therefore probably have to accept that this debate is not going to be settled for a long time to come, and shift the focus to more socially and politically relevant topics.

At the end of the day, does it really matter whether apparent differences are caused by innate factors or by socially constructed stereotypes? As long as we know that evolutions in behaviours and preferences are possible – and this we *do* know – what should trigger our interest is the way we can push for progressive change. In this perspective, the problem does not necessarily lie in defining the existence of differences between the sexes – too often amalgamated with inequalities by so-called ‘experts’ on gender – but in legitimising dominations with ‘differentialist’ discourses. In other words, the problem is not believing that men and women are different. Nor is it the establishment of the innate or constructed dimensions of the alleged differences between them. The problem lies rather in believing that

the dominations women endure are inevitable because and only because they are women. We need to shift the debate away from a struggle against difference (or socially constructed difference) towards a struggle against domination. This would lead to recommendations very distinct from the ones currently made by most experts. And in the course of this struggle for individual liberty, it is essential to avoid the idealistic trap without overlooking the role played by structures as well as by individual and collective interest.

Concerning the case of single-parent families, it is thus important to not be stuck in the dominant debate between ‘constructivists’ and ‘differentialists’ because this would be scientifically dubious and strategically inefficient. To establish the relative role of constructed and innate factors explaining the rise in numbers of single mothers and the difficulties experienced by them is an almost impossible task and would take us away from a more urgent sociopolitical goal: namely, that of alleviating the injustices suffered by the persons concerned. Again, what matters here is moving away from domination towards effective individual freedom. For that purpose, we need to start elaborating a convincing discourse linking medium- and long-term alternatives to the individual interests of the women concerned.

IN SEARCH OF EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

An Issue to be tackled at the European Level

Although the phenomenon of single motherhood has been much analysed, this marked interest on the part of experts has not led to any substantial public policies dedicated to remedying the problem. Yet, this issue should clearly be targeted at the European level, and with greater tools than ‘soft law’ instruments or general recommendations. It should also be

tackled with more explicit ‘hard law’ such as regulations and directives. A Europeanisation of the solution can be justified for several reasons: first of all, it is related to the labour market (and more particularly the rate of employment), which is itself very much impacted by European policies, directly and indirectly. Like the directives against discrimination or the directive project on maternity leave – a new project will be proposed by the new commission after the last one was withdrawn as a consequence of the Better Regulation Agenda – a proposal to harmonise custody laws could be justified to improve the functioning of the labour market within the EU. It would improve labour mobility and remove some obstacles to female participation to the labour market, in which many single women struggle to find or keep a job. Secondly, it would also help fight against the poverty of women as well as of children, since children raised in single families are more likely to fall into that state. Thirdly, gender-related issues in general are also important for the EU in terms of legitimacy: women represent more than half of the European citizenry. The EU should therefore go much deeper in proposing specific policies that target the injustices women suffer if it wants to regain their support. Of course, this would require much more than tackling single motherhood. Yet, this topic constitutes an exacerbation of many disadvantages affecting women in general. Addressing it as a part of its broader agenda to improve equality between women and men could reboot the EU’s ‘output legitimacy’. The links between, on one hand, single parenthood and, on the other, access to the labour market and the reduction of poverty, are present in the ‘Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016–2019 that follows the ‘Strategy for equality between women and men for 2010–2015’ as well as in the EU 2020 strategy. However, one general shortcoming of these strategies is that they outline objectives and recommendations which seem difficult to meet in practice, partly

because they depend on the EU’s broader macroeconomic policies, which are not particularly favourable to growth and employment today. Furthermore, as we have seen, the problems affecting single mothers are not only material. Much more needs to be done in terms of ‘hard law’ if one is to tackle the serious disadvantages affecting single mothers in the EU.

Promoting shared Parenting

As already expressed, the solution to the problems experienced by single mothers is not to re-establish the dominance of the traditional family, since that would come at the expense of definite progress in terms of individual freedom. But neither is it to simply ‘change mentalities’ by waging a war against gender stereotypes. As we have seen, this official mantra, which permeates current expertise on gender, relies on problematic premises. More generally, ideas are not, by themselves, the reasons for particular injustices and replacing them with alternative visions will not magically change the problems at hand. If ideological work is needed it is in a less idealistic and much more dynamic approach: gender norms tend to justify particular situations of domination but they do not create them. Alternative views on gender will be useful and effective only in so far as they trigger mobilisations on the part of the victims of the injustices denounced, and, furthermore, if this involvement leads to concrete political action. Put differently and applied to our topic: single mothers need to get involved in supporting new public policies that will improve their lives and well-being.

New ideas and discourses should keep that objective in focus: they need to speak to single mothers, so that they get involved, either directly or indirectly, in putting pressure on policymakers to remove the disadvantages they are experiencing. And in this struggle, single mothers need to perceive the connection

between their situation and that of other women. Because, in the end, it is only in getting socially and politically involved that women will improve their situations. But the alliance among women cannot be total; some specificities have to be recognised to help particular social groups such as single mothers. Furthermore, on issues concerning children and parenthood, it is absolutely indispensable to also speak to fathers: more and more among them have developed a need and willingness to look after their children on a regular and substantial basis, even after separations. However, let us note that individual freedom in relationships matters does not exclude that some individuals might choose a traditional setting in terms of gender norms. What is contradictory to freedom – and involves the risk of ‘perfectionism’ in the philosophical sense of the term – is when one particular vision of the good is presented as inherently better and is pushed as a model to be adopted by everyone.

In that respect, some of the solutions put forward by analysts are highly unlikely to either alleviate the difficulties experienced by single mothers or to generate the popular support they would need to find some political outlet. Finding ways of enabling single mothers to work more, for instance, is not a desirable solution at all. This is something promoted in many European countries. But evidence shows that even if the women concerned get better wages by working longer hours, they experience higher fatigue, stress and depression rates. Other measures such as putting in place more affordable childcare, making sure the non-resident parent pays an alimony, having more flexibility on the job market (e.g., concerning working hours), increasing employment opportunities, facilitating access to cheaper accommodation or preventing discrimination against single mothers, could all contribute to ameliorating the latter’s situation. But they are equivalent to putting a plaster on a deep wound. More structural solutions are needed.

On the medium-term policy level, the generalisation of shared parenting after separations could win the interest of a majority of parents. An increasing body of literature has shown that this could be the optimal solution for both parents as well as children. Indeed, it allows parents to spend quality time with their kids, but also to keep being involved in the job market and in other activities, as well as building new relationships. It also allows children to see both of their parents consistently. A few countries – such as Belgium – have legislated to make shared custody the norm when parents disagree after a separation. But here we are talking about an obligation of shared parenting – except, of course, when one of the parents is unfit. The Council of Europe has been advocating this solution: it calls on the Member States to ‘introduce into their laws the principle of shared residence following a separation, limiting any exceptions to cases of child abuse or neglect, or domestic violence, with the amount of time for which the child lives with each parent being adjusted according to the child’s needs and interests.’ There are numerous legal instruments to support such a measure. For example, respect for family life is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 9 of the UN 1989 Convention on children’s rights stresses the right of children to not be separated from their parents – unless the child’s superior interest demands it and, even in this case, the child has a right to see the parent(s) from whom he is separated. The EU could contribute to the advancement of the debate on this issue, for example, by recommending such a legislative change at the level of Member States.

A long term alternative Project

However, shared parental responsibility should not be used, as it is often proposed, as a mere tool to transcend gender stereotypes about the roles supposedly assigned to women and men. The main argument for shared custody as a

norm should be that it is in the interest of all the members of a broken family – and not only in the interests of the children and of the fathers, as is often suggested

This being said, interests rarely speak for themselves and often have to be expressed by discourses that do not reflect them mechanically but do manage to articulate the individual interests of the people targeted. This is necessary to generate a mobilisation which will then impact on political leaders' willingness to be elected or re-elected. In other words: short- and medium-term alternative policies – such as the generalisation of shared custody as the legal norm in separations – rarely trigger support by themselves. Because of the considerable existing obstacles to such changes, they need to be encompassed by a broader discourse, a more general and even utopian vision that can both explain their meaning and trigger the support necessary for their implementation. Politicians usually have to be pressured into implementing progressive policies. This does not mean that such discourses have to be purely rational in the classical sense of the term. They have to appeal to emotions as well. Recognition of one's own interest in particular measures is not purely an intellectual matter, but can also be an appeal to the heart and guts. This is all the more the case when those measures concern such basic and important personal issues as families, children and relationships.

This long-term alternative vision cannot simply amount to a criticism of gender stereotypes or present an alternative based on the ideal of a 'gender-free' society. On the one hand, a purely negative approach is never going to rally sufficient support, even from the people who are the most concerned. On the other, the focus on gender is certainly very stimulating from an academic and intellectual point of view, but it is unlikely to appeal to the heart and mind of the average citizen. More specifically, the dominant discourse on gender, in a very idealistic fashion,

tends to focus on intellectual deconstruction, leaving it to the individual to think about what could replace those hegemonic conceptions once they are scrapped. Thus, one hears that if one understands that we all get socialised into particular gender norms – the norm of sacrificial motherhood, for instance – this knowledge will be sufficient to be freed from them. This approach equates knowledge of the obstacles to freedom to freedom itself. But it is doubly deluded: not only does it posit a problematic relationship between gender stereotypes and the injustices affecting women, but it also falls into the idealistic trap in which understanding means transformation. Certainly, deconstruction of gender norms can help us understand that what we believe to be true or eternal about the distribution of social roles between the sexes might just be – at least partly – a social construction. However, as such, it does not establish a causal link between socialisation and inequalities between the sexes, and it does not help us to elaborate policies that reduce domination.

What is needed to mobilise individuals is a realistic utopia. The objective of individual freedom could be the key to such a project. In this enterprise, it is vital to remember that women need to be appealed to with categories that not only match their interests, but also take the general structures in which they are involved into account. Ideas do not float in the air but have to be grounded in interests in order to be effective, and both ideas and interests are very much influenced by broader structures. This structural dimension is indispensable both in explaining injustices and in trying to overcome them.

Empathy and Interest as Engines of social Progress

Structural constraints – partly social and partly innate – exist and limit individual agency. In order to speak to women here and now, any

discourse that can find some echo among the average woman must inevitably take these structures into account. For instance, the social situation lived by single mothers inevitably impacts on their minds and bodies. Almost all of their private life is focused on one or several children and trying to find adequate sources of income. In order to speak to women experiencing this situation, it is necessary to take into account the fact that their very short-term interest is partly triggered by their contextual constraints: building a better future for their child (or children), making sure the father becomes more involved, keeping a close tie with their child, improving their material situation, rebuilding a relationship with a man without negatively impacting on their offspring(s), and so on.

This broader context has to inform a longer-term alternative discourse: as human beings, women are also driven by selfish tendencies. Nonetheless, the natural reflex of humans to develop selfless thoughts and acts towards their family is probably increased in their case, since the latter becomes, in practice, much more important for them. And of course, this is exacerbated in the case of single mothers who are the only carers of their children. If this element is part of the structural dimension that has to be taken into account, it is important to highlight that this overblown tendency for selflessness can never extinguish the fundamental human need to also express one's own individuality and personal interest. This natural selfishness is another structural constraint but a more universal and natural one. When this tendency to express one's selfish desires is repeatedly blocked, unease and negative sentiments result. And indeed, most women who spend their time looking after their children become only half or shrunken selves rather than feeling complete or fulfilled. This repression of some of their fundamental needs can actually lead to a lot of anger, anxiety,

sadness and even depression, all the more if these needs are not recognised by the women themselves as legitimate. However, once taken out of this confined environment – at work, with friends or in campaigning activities – women, as well as men, can rediscover and explicitly embrace some enlightened selfishness, which can connect their own private interest with that of the rest of a social group or with society in general. A convincing alternative has to outline such a possibility in an appealing fashion and put forward alternative life models.

Besides, the slightly higher level of empathy found in women could be channeled and used in very diverse ways. It is indeed probable that their biological vulnerability and ability to bear children and the social environment in which these biological traits develop could have increased their level of empathy, as some research seems to show. Empathy can be increased by higher levels of some hormones, such as oxytocin and prolactin. These hormones are not solely feminine, contrary to the postulations of many essentialists – they can also be produced by men. But they are higher during pregnancy and after birth. And since women look after children more, they can be heightened even when children grow up. This is not an inevitable fact: men who care about their children produce these 'attachment hormones' as well. But in our societies, it is not impossible that the higher level of empathy observed in women could be partly due to their more significant involvement in the care they provide among others to children. Another interesting hypothesis put forward by several authors is that when individuals are in subordinate positions, they tend to develop higher abilities to show empathy: being socially inferior requires being more attuned to the needs and emotions of more powerful people. This could boost the empathy of the individual in general and of women in particular. Nonetheless, a high level of empathy does not necessarily equate to altruism.

There is indeed a difference between the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy. Being able to decipher and understand another's needs and feelings – cognitive empathy – does not necessarily mean that one needs to show a response that takes into account the interest of that other – affective empathy – let alone that one has to show selfless behaviours. An alternative and mobilising discourse for female emancipation could indeed use women's tendency to empathise more with the needs of others (mainly in the cognitive sense) to push them to leave situations of domination or get involved in campaigning activities.

In the long term, however, if women could start to see themselves as individuals and human beings before anything else, characterised by selfish as well as selfless needs, in need of self-fulfillment rather than as simple providers for the needs of others, they would be much stronger as mothers in general. They would experience single motherhood very differently and would probably fight much harder for shared custody, because they would not feel guilty about it. As for mothers who are in couple, they would fight for a fair distribution of the care provided to children. More generally, the challenge for a realistic utopia – an alternative project grounded in the interests of the individuals belonging to a particular disadvantaged group – would be to start from the current perceptions of the feminine in order to open up avenues and possibilities of what the 'feminine' is about. In this enterprise, existing structures need to be taken into account for any alternative discourse to find resonance among women, but in a transformative way: only those structures that cannot be changed – the human need to have one's own interest taken into

account, for instance – need to be recognised as such, while the ones one can act upon – the social, political and economic environment – need to be presented as flexible and malleable. And this change can only come about through the involvement of the people who find an advantage in it. By getting involved collectively women can indeed impact on the internal and external structural obstacles impeding their freedom. The few measures proposed above to remedy the difficulties experienced by single mothers are just one example of a much broader struggle against the numerous injustices still affecting women.

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