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## The negative stereotyping of lone mothers

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## **The Negative Stereotyping of Lone Mothers**

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In the following article the author examines the negative stereotyping of lone mothers. She establishes the existence of stereotypes and explains their functionality in supporting a neo-liberal agenda. She asserts that such constructions are not simply an historical artefact and presents recent examples, highlighting the ongoing challenge presented by the negative stereotyping of lone mothers. In the main, her article focuses on deconstructing and countering the assertions that support such stereotypes, exposing their erroneous nature.

### **Introduction**

In recent years the topic of lone motherhood in Ireland has been the focus of considerable attention; attention which for the most part has not been positive. In the areas of academia and the media, lone mothers have come under attack for what they are purported to represent, fecklessness and wilful dependence on the State to provide, to the detriment of society. Two such public assertions of this view are a speech, concerning “unpleasant social phenomena” that Dr. Edward Walsh felt were linked to the growth of lone motherhood, delivered during a lecture in University College Cork in 2005 (Walsh 2005), and a response to the furore created by this speech by the journalist Kevin Myers (2005) in the Irish Times. This essay attempts to counter the negative stereotypes of lone mothers, specifically the idea that they are lazy scroungers who make a conscious decision to live off the State. I intend to highlight the existence of such stereotypes, both in Ireland and abroad, and debunk them by looking at whether or not real barriers do actually exist that preclude them from entering the workforce. I will provide an example of a country which has

addressed these and has resultantly seen a huge improvement in the living standards of these parents as well as benefits for the economy. I hope to show that the stereotype we have of the lone parent is used to further a political ideology, and discourage anyone from deviating from the exercise of this ideology by excluding those who do.

### **Stereotyping**

The blanket stereotyping of single parents - specifically lone mothers - as scroungers who choose to live off the State is both an undeniable reality, and a shameful one. As a result of this stereotyping, which takes place in the media, in our print publications, and in the discourse of our public representatives, a thoroughly negative image of these people is concocted. This filters through to become a general attitude that society has adopted in relation to them (Edelman 1998). According to these stereotypes, the lone parent is practically always female, usually young, uneducated, idle and utterly unmotivated to improve her life, happy to live off the State instead. In such discourse this group of people is overwhelmingly spoken about as though it is a uniform group, not a disparate collection of women (widows, singletons, divorcees, rape victims, 20-somethings, 40-somethings) whose shared characteristic is that they've reproduced. When speaking about these people, conservative language, language heavily laced with latent meaning, is often used (Edelman 1998). This neo-liberally sympathetic language talks of those women as being "dependant", and of needing "welfare". It paints the situation not as though it is the State's responsibility to look after any of its citizens who need assistance, but rather as though the innate sloth of those women obliges the State to provide for them. This myth, which Edelman (1998) refers to as "The Dominant Myth", operates by effectively removing responsibility from the State for the poor, thus bolstering the Capitalist system.

## Walsh and Myers

In Dr. Walsh's speech, he asserts that in his opinion the State's provision of "real financial incentives" to single parents results in women being actively encouraged to form lone parent families. He backs up this statement by revealing that the number of lone-mothers receiving Lone-Parents Allowance Family Benefit has jumped from less than 3,000 in 1975 to 80,000 in 2005. He states that nowadays a single mother of two can hope to receive up to €25,000 in social benefits, and goes on to say that "the support that the State provides may have moved further than it should". He continues by saying that much research literature has concluded that there is a link between Ireland's modern social ills and the growth of these lone-parent families, especially lone-mother families. When Dr. Walsh feels compelled to speak on a subject, others listen; indeed he was expressly invited to give this speech. It shows how entrenched in our society these views must be, to varying extents, when one as learned as Dr. Walsh thinks this is an accurate characterisation of these women. I feel this to be a very one-sided presentation of the monetary facts by such an educated man, and will present an alternative interpretation in some detail later in this article.

As much as Dr. Walsh's opinions make for unsettling reading, they are at least not vitriolic. Kevin Myers (2005) however, wrote a response piece to the controversy surrounding the speech that demonises lone mothers as a group to an indefensible extent. In an article that brimmed with personal dislike more than facts, Mr Myers (2005) paints a picture of lone mothers as stupid women, incapable of seeing the long-term trouble they're creating for themselves and the State by blindly grabbing at the inordinate amounts of cash the State is willing to give them. He refers to their motherhood as "cash-crop whelping" (Myers 2005, p.17). He ridicules any dissent or sympathy for such lone mothers as "the schoolgirl swamp of what is 'hurtful' and 'offensive'" (Myers 2005,

p.17), and he looks favourably on the United States for what he sees as having a tough love stance with lone mothers, cutting handouts and introducing incentives which he says has 2/3 of lone mothers now back to work. The language throughout the article is negative; “MoBs (mothers of bastards), “the confused, the backward, the lazy” (Myers 2005, p.17). Some of the facts also stand at odds with evidence I have found during my research; Mr Myers (2005, p.17) states that the majority of lone mothers are teenagers, however Phoenix, in ‘Social Constructions of Lone Motherhood’ states that teenage girls giving birth constitute only 4% of all lone mothers (Phoenix 1996, p.180). Myers’ view of America seems to be equally questionable, oversimplifying the situation to state that “After 30 years of unbroken increase, the rise in MoBery was swiftly halted. Welfare handouts plummeted; and ten years on two out of three MoBs are now in work” (Myers 2005, p.17). This fails to take into account what the realities of life are for these lone mothers. Adair (2002), in her article ‘Branded with infamy: Inscriptions of poverty and class in the United States’ paints an altogether bleaker picture, whereby the difficulty in securing welfare has only succeeded in taking these women from the welfare payroll, not from taking them out of poverty. If anything, the fact that they have no choice but to subsist on minimum wage jobs to support their children means they cannot continue their education, and are often not around to supervise their children; resulting in the high percentage of gang members in America being from lone-mother families as Myers says.

### **Out of Ireland**

These negative stereotypes are not unique to Ireland alone, or to recent history. In America, throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, a negative stereotype of the lone mother was developed, which “produced a construction of lone mothers as ‘feckless’” (Phoenix 1996, p.175). This stereotype was disseminated through politics, for example Bill Clinton’s period as President in the early 1990’s,

which saw a severe decrease in welfare available to lone mothers. This period saw the signing into force of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) which abolished a major cash transfer programme known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Whereas the former was an entitlement, the latter was subject to many provisos, the biggest of which was participation in the workforce (Alfred and Martin 2007; Polakow et al. 2004; Abramovitz 2006; Handler 2003; Adair 2001). This seemed to suggest that if the Government felt these women could manage to go to work if compelled, then they must have been staying at home merely through laziness (Christopher 2004; Abramovitz 2006; Adair 2008). However as I intend to show, the majority of lone mothers stay at home simply because the jobs that they are eligible for do not cover the cost of childcare incurred by working. This is contrary to public opinion however, and this “discursive formation” (Foucault 1972), has in turn allowed the creation of certain laws, such as Bride Fare in Wisconsin (Adair 2002), which can easily be seen as punitive measures, imposing obligations on lone mothers to comply with very restrictive and some might say degrading Government measures in order to be eligible for welfare. The system holds her to ransom, it does not help her. However, as Adair (2002) points out, this has in no way served to help these women.

When an individual born in a neo-liberal society such as Ireland, England or America thinks of a lone parent, we may associate the position with this particular feckless stereotype, yet in Ireland at least, this has not always been the case. From the release of “Cathy Come Home” in 1966 to the mid 1980’s, the lone mother was seen as an at-risk figure, not a figure who posed a risk herself (Duncan et al 1999; Jacobs et al 2003). If anything, the prejudice ran the

other way, that such a girl as would fall pregnant while unmarried was incapable of looking after the child at all, and from this view of her incapacity came the widespread practice of adopting babies conceived out of wedlock. These women may always have been subject to pre-conceived notions in Ireland, but they were not always demonised. However Ireland is a country that has increasingly placed itself closer Boston than Berlin, and with social welfare being viewed as dead money in such a productivity-centred society, it seems inroads are being made to legitimise a curbing of welfare. Once popularised through the media, these ideas take on the appearance of objective reality (Pheonix 1996, p.176). It is all too possible to stigmatise and exclude a group in society with a negligible voice - they pose little opposition - so as to preserve the status quo, and maintain an economic system where no huge spending is made in social welfare (Edelman 1998).

As a result of this stigmatisation, little real attention is paid by the State to why these people might find it more difficult than others to find or retain a job. Their lack of employment paints them as breaking a taboo in society by not contributing to the societal good - they are not a productive facet of society, and are thus “branded” and excluded (Adair 2002, p.457).

Social welfare for lone parents is perceived by many in this country as all the incentive that someone conforming to their stereotyped understanding of lone mothers needs to shirk their social responsibility to get a job, “living off the State until the grave takes over” (Myers 2005, p.17); employment is constructed as “empowering” welfare dependants, removing them from the welfare system. However this empowerment doesn’t stand up to investigation, as a single person with a part time job can often earn up to 20% less per week than if they were on welfare (OPEN 2006). So how much exactly are these women entitled to receive from the State?

## **Reality**

### **The Paucity of Benefits**

According to OPEN, a representative group for one-parent families, the situation is far from that painted by Mr. Myers (2005, p.17), who claimed that single mother families (or “M. o. B.”-Mothers of Bastards) were earning up to €23,000 per year in social benefits. The basic entitlement, as laid out in OPEN’s (2006, p.1) budget submission, amounts to €184.47 per week-well below the poverty line of €246.75, and MUCH below Mr. Myers’ widely read estimate.

Even when supplemented with other entitlements, such as the Family Income Supplement, the Rent Supplement, the One-Parent Family Payment etc. Anne, the single mother example employed in the OPEN (2006, p.10) submission, has a “net income after housing when unemployed” of €238.24. This, multiplied by 52, is €12,388.48 - a far cry from Mr. Myers’ approximation.

So how do the media reach figures like that if they appear so far from the truth? If one is not aware of the intricacies of the welfare system, it is easy to log on to the Department of Social and Family Affairs and simply add up every entitlement figure until you reach a substantial sum. Unfortunately, those doing this rarely realise that so many of those benefits are restrictively means-tested, or cancel each other out by reaching a certain cut-off point, that nobody manages to be eligible for all of them. However this doesn’t fit as snugly with the stereotypical view of such women as scroungers, as very few would happily curtail their lives so severely for an amount that doesn’t even exceed the poverty threshold. The question often posed by the media in response to such arguments is, if welfare payments are apparently so inadequate, why do these

women not simply go and find themselves good employment? What's stopping them? Actually, quite a lot as it turns out.

### **Socio-economic position and lone-motherhood**

That your socio-economic position from birth has a profound effect on your chances in life as regards accessing wealth has been clearly established (Wadsworth 2001). However, a link has also been established by the Family and Working Lives Survey (FWLS) in England that one's socio-economic position has an effect on the social outcomes as regards family. For instance, a girl whose father is an unskilled labourer was found to have six times the chance of becoming a lone mother as one whose father was in a profession. The idea that these girls are more likely to become pregnant however (either intentionally to 'bleed the State', or accidentally through 'stupidity') is a separate concept, as it has equally been shown that pregnancies may be as common among middle class girls as working class girls but middle class girls are more likely to have abortions (Rowlingston and McKay 2005, p.36). Therefore these girls aren't more likely to fall pregnant, just more likely not to take any action on finding out that they are pregnant. As their prospects are less illustrious education and career-wise due to their socio-economic status, the idea of a child can be reconciled more easily with their plans for themselves in the future. However, it has equally been found that women from middle-class backgrounds who do choose to continue with the pregnancy are more likely to find spouses than those from working-class backgrounds (Rowlingston and McKay 1998). Lone motherhood seems to have much less to do with choice and more to do with a lack thereof.

### **Early school-leavers and the Poverty trap**

A child is an expensive and time consuming person. If a girl falls pregnant at a school-going age, it can be extremely difficult to keep up with all that's

expected of her in school, particularly during an exam year, and deal with the physical fatigues of pregnancy. A large proportion of single mothers leave school early, with the average age for school leaving amongst the randomly selected group of 64 lone parents in the Doras Buí group being 16.9 years, and almost 50% of these having left with only a Junior Cert (Healy 2004, p.17).

Without a Leaving Cert or equivalent qualification, the prospects for employment are rarely going to extend far beyond minimum wage. As I have said, the disincentive for such employment does not lie in the State's welfare payments, but in the inability of one to provide for a family from one minimum wage income. A counter argument might be made that lone mothers considering returning to education should put up with a reduced State allowance for one year, in order to obtain their Leaving Certificate and earn much more in the long term?

### **Childcare costs as a barrier to further education and financial independence**

The education system as it stands at the moment does very little to facilitate lone teen mothers. Once they have left the education system, very few re-enter as the only way is through committing to the full time Back to Education programme. The Back to Education initiative is aimed at people who for one reason or another didn't finish out their schooling. However the very criteria for admissibility are what 21 of the 64 participants of Doras Buí's<sup>1</sup> lone parent participants found precludes them from taking part (Healy 2004). The programme centres around a full time course; this is unfeasible for most lone parents, as they would not be able to afford the cost of full time childcare each

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<sup>1</sup> Doras Bui is a community resource centre for one parent families located on the north east side of Dublin City.

day, and don't have a spouse or partner to provide the service for free. Childcare costs on average €172 per week for a baby of less than 1 year and €145 after that (Brady 2005, p.377). When we take Anne from the OPEN (2006) case study earning €238.24 after housing when unemployed, we see that this constitutes a serious barrier to accessing education, as there is simply no way to pay childcare. Moreover, one is not entitled to apply for the Back to Education Programme until one is 21 years of age. Furthermore, the Back to Education Allowance that comes with it may serve to preclude you from certain secondary benefits, such as the Rent Supplement (Citizens Information Board 2008).

The State's obstinate refusal to acknowledge this large hole in the Back to Education Programme shows that the initiative could arguably be classed as paying lip service to the problem, and not actually addressing it. I argue that this is as a result of a number of influences - a New Right tendency in Ireland, which represents welfare as being the individual's responsibility; the fact that Ireland's very Constitutional basis sees the woman's place as being firmly in the home (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937, art.41.2.2); and, for both economic and latent social reasons, the lack of sufficient will to change the situation. The myth of these women's personal culpability supports the status quo by creating a general sentiment that they got themselves into the situation through their feckless behaviour, and they should get themselves out.

## **Conclusion**

In direct comparison to Ireland, where 18.2% of GDP is spent on social welfare (CORI 2008) and 23% of its lone mothers work (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1996) Sweden spends 32% of its GDP on social welfare (CORI 2008) and 61% of its lone mothers work (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1996). Sweden's attitude towards lone mothers and social welfare differs dramatically from Ireland's, and it shows up in the make-up of its economy. It has more people

contributing to the economy for the good of the country, because its welfare system facilitated them in reaching this accessing sustainable employment. Sweden is known as being a very open-minded country with negligible religious influence and a neo-corporatist outlook, and across the board lone parents are seen as being no less deserving of State assistance than anyone else. Their economic value is recognised, as is the reality that putting State money towards addressing the barriers that prevent from participating in the workforce is money well spent.

In this article, I have presented evidence, that lone parents are often construed as parasites, who bleed the State welfare system dry here in Ireland, however it should be is equally obvious upon further investigation that the facts do not support this portrayal of such women. Lone parents, specifically single mothers in Ireland, are not given a bad name because it's deserved, or because of righteous moral indignation at their behaviour, but because their status as a single mother receiving State aid, both subverts and diverts resources from the patriarchal neo-liberal economic system (Adair 2002, p.454).

Looking at the realities of life as a lone parent, in terms of severely constrained earning potential, a lowered chance of attaining recognised qualifications due to barriers facing you, and the social stigma of being viewed as a drain on the economy, it is very difficult to believe Dr. Edward Walsh and Mr. Kevin Myers' assertion that some young women enter lone parenthood as a "career choice" (Myers 2005, p.17) due to the "wide range of social and financial supports" made available to them by the State (Walsh 2005). Lone parents are more likely to fall below the poverty threshold -33% do (European Anti Poverty Network Ireland 2008) they are 6 times more likely to have their baby die of cot death (Hall 2002), and are now more likely to live in poverty than they were in

the 1980's (Payne 2001). I find the portrayal of them as actively signing up for hardship like this to be ridiculously blinkered to the facts, and with no factually based evidence of its own. These women are portrayed as such to discourage anyone else from becoming what amounts to a diversion of State funds away from the economic market-and unfortunately for the 189,200 lone parents in the State in 2006 (Central Statistics Office 2007), this stereotype shows absolutely no sign of abating any time soon.

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