

# **Single Parent Families and Poverty in Continental Welfare States: Examining Dutch Policy Responses to New Social Risks**

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## **Abstract**

An interdisciplinary literature demonstrates that lone-parent families confront the new social risks as an overwhelmingly feminized group and have a higher risk of poverty. Recent research also demonstrates cross-national differences in single-parent poverty and emphasizes the role of social policy settings in various welfare states in shaping the economic security of single-mother families. How do welfare regimes in Europe respond to new social risks such as increasing income insecurity of lone-parent families? This research examines the redesign of social policies to respond to the new risk structures by focusing on the situation of lone parents in Netherlands as an empirical terrain to address the question of stability or change of continental welfare states.

## Introduction

The rise of single-parent families figures at the very top of any list of “new social risks” that the traditional welfare state allegedly has difficulty dealing with (see, e.g., Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 6; Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002; Bonoli 2005; Jenson, 2004; Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006, Noël, 2006). Across the OECD the proportion of single-parent families has risen significantly in the course of the past several decades (OECD, 2011: 19; see also Lehmann and Wirtz, 2004; Whiteford and Adema, 2007; Trifiletti, 2007). These families are overwhelmingly headed by women and they are everywhere the family type with the greatest risk by far of falling into poverty (Ananat and Michaels, 2008; Minnotte 2012; Whiteford and Adema, 2007). Thus, the rise of the single-mother family and its effect on poverty levels have become topics of major concern for social policy makers and observers (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008, Trifletti, 2007; Ananat and Michaels, 2008; Bianchi, 1999; Seccombe, 2000; Thomas and Sawhill, 2002).

At the same time, the social policy landscape has evolved in the established welfare states, partly in an effort to meet the challenge of such “new social risks”. Among the most important recent trends has been a widespread move away from so-called “passive” social protection measures, that is, programs that provide financial support to compensate for income loss due to lack of employment, and towards more “activating” approaches which provide services and incentives for beneficiaries to take up employment (Hemerijck 2010; [other refs.]). Among the most important activating policies are those that encourage and enable women with children to enter the labour force, such as parental leave programs, daycare facilities and the like. Even the traditionally single-breadwinner oriented ‘Bismarckian’ welfare states on the European continent have gradually abandoned their traditional approach and begun to implement policies predicated on the two-earner family model (Palier, 2010). In addition to rendering the welfare state more fiscally sustainable by increasing the size of the labour force, such policies are also at least in part a response to the rising “new social risk” of single-mother families. For by opening up opportunities for mothers to find and hold employment in combination with their childcaring responsibilities, such policies presumably reduce the risk of poverty among families headed by single females [refs.].

There are good empirical and theoretical reasons focusing on the Netherlands to study this confluence of social and policy trends. During 1990’s and early 2000’s, important elements of Dutch welfare state were re-designed: there were important policy changes in the social

assistance schemes, in the social security system, in tax incentives and in childcare arrangements (Knijn and Saraceno, 2010). One major effect of these policy changes has been a spectacular rise in the female labour force participation, including women with (young) children and single mothers. As a result, the Netherlands is often portrayed as a successful example of a Continental welfare state that enacted activation reforms and implemented active social policies (Bonoli, 2013). This transformation, characterized as the “Dutch miracle” at the end of 1990’s, is said to have created job growth and low unemployment through a series of reforms while lowering welfare state expenditure (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997).

At the same time, however, the poverty rate of lone parent families in the Netherlands has substantially increased from 14% in 1985 to 37% in 2004 (OECD, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. As the rise of female labour force participation is supposed to help *reduce* the risk of poverty among single-mother families, the simultaneous increase in employment and poverty rates of single parents in the Netherlands constitutes a puzzle. In this paper we will try to address this puzzle by taking a closer look at the combination of policies and their interaction with other social trends that could have produced these paradoxical results.

In doing so, we follow a recent move towards a more multi-dimensional analysis of social policy in the literature on welfare state reform (Jenson and Duyulmus, 2014; Bonoli and Natali, 2012; Hausermann, 2010; Bonoli, 1997). Recently Bonoli and Natali (2012) emphasized examining the multidimensional character of welfare state change in OECD countries considering three aspects: level of protection (expansion or retrenchment), pro-employment protection (balance of passive and active measures), and encompassing character of provision (extent of coverage). In this paper we will further add to this multi-dimensional approach by taking into account the wider social, cultural and economic context within which welfare policy reform takes place.

We will start by discussing risks associated with single-parent families, discussing the findings of the literature on new social risks and lone parenthood. In this section we will analyze how income security and employment patterns of lone parents evolved in Netherlands since 1990’s. In the second part we will propose an analytical framework for multi-dimensional analysis of social policy change. Then we will examine the transformation of welfare and gender

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<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated otherwise we use the conventional relative household poverty measure of disposable (i.e. after taxes and transfers) income below 50% of the national median.

regimes in the Netherlands since 1990s, specifically focusing on the policy packages and societal changes that most likely to influence the context of lone parent families. On the basis of our account of the confluence of trends in the Netherlands we will conclude by proposing a possible explanation for the puzzling association between rising labour force participation and rising poverty among single-mother families during this period and consider some of the empirical evidence that appears to support our explanation.

### **Single Parent Families and New Social Risks: Empirical Findings Trends and Theoretical Explanations**

Until recent decades, lone-parent families have been one of the “categories” of social and family policy analysis (Eydoux and Letablier, 2007) mostly created by the death of a – breadwinning – parent. Since then, single parent families have been the result of a range of social, demographic and economic changes. Rising rates of divorce, cohabitation and unstable couples, teenage pregnancies, and other changes to social norms have all contributed both to the increase in lone-parent families and to public policy attention paid to them. Despite the changes in ways that a lone-parent families are formed, the corresponding policy challenge has never changed: households with one parent have a higher risk of poverty (Lewis, 1998: 9) than other types of households.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarly debate has intensified as single-mother families and their presence among the poor have risen in recent decades (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008, Trifletti, 2007). Studies emphasize a strong relation between lone motherhood and children’s, women’s, and overall poverty (Ananat and Michaels, 2008; Bianchi, 1999; Seccombe, 2000; Thomas and Sawhill, 2002). A number of studies found that children living in single-parent families are more likely to be poor (Bradshaw and Chzhen, 2009; Marlier and Atkinson, 2010). Data from the mid-1990s revealed that across the OECD world the probability that a child living in a lone-parent family would be poor was, on average, four times higher than that of children in other families (UNICEF, 2000: 11). The poverty rate of lone-parent families was reported to be twice that of other households in the European Union in 1996 (Chambaz, 2001: 666). Even in social

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<sup>3</sup> In the first decades of the 20th century, various Mothers’ Allowances to provide an income to widows with young children were introduced in Europe. It was only in the 1970s that the category of single-parent family first began to be used in public statistical analyses (Eydoux and Letablier, 2007).

democratic Sweden children living in lone-parent families were 4.5 times more likely to be poor than were children in other families. As child poverty emerged as a major policy concern the 1990s (UNICEF, 2000)<sup>4</sup>, the disproportionate poverty risk of children living in lone-parent families became, for all the inter-country variation, a particularly urgent issue in public and scholarly debate.

What are the factors that increase the probability of the – generally female – heads of family being low-income earners? There are various explanations and mechanisms emphasized by the interdisciplinary literature on the relation of single parenthood and poverty that addresses this question. There are four types of explanation of single parent families' risks of poverty, emphasizing the prevalence of different factors: family structure, employment status, gender regime, and public policies. In line with the multidimensional approach we favour here, the most recent literature on new social risks insists on a complex relation between these factors to account for the situation of lone parent families.

Earlier studies emphasized the lack of spousal support and the burdens of raising children in families mostly headed by single women (Seccombe, 2000; Sorensen, 1994). But such explanations based on family structure and its characteristics often fail to account for cross-national differences of poverty associated with lone parenthood despite similar rates of lone-parent families. UNICEF's study on child poverty challenged this approach, arguing that there was no evidence that it was lone-parent families per se that were leading to high poverty rates (UNICEF, 2000). For instance, while Sweden and the United Kingdom had similar percentages of children living in lone-parent families (%20 in UK and %21.3 in Sweden) in the mid-1990s, the respective poverty rates of these families were dramatically different, 19.8% in the UK versus 2.6% in Sweden (UNICEF, 2000: 15).

Other studies look at employment patterns of women in lone-parent families to explain their low-income status, endorsing a wide-spread diagnosis of the problem as one of unemployment rather than family structure (Millar and Andrea, 1996). There is considerable cross-national variation in the employment rates of women, particularly of mothers (Pettit and Hook, 2009). Mothers' employment rates are generally lower than those of childless women (Keck and Saraceno, 2013). By the 1990s in many European countries the employment rate of

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<sup>4</sup> The UNICEF report on child poverty published in 2000 reflects these concerns with single parent families considering the wellbeing of children living in single headed families (UNICEF, 2000)

lone mothers was significantly lower than that of married mothers (Knijn, Martin and Millar, 2007: 640). The problem of “workless” households was viewed as particularly acute in the liberal welfare regimes (Rake, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

However the relation between employment status and income security of lone-parent families turns out to be more complex than one might think. First, the poverty rate among non-employed lone-parents varies widely, from 65% in the UK to 24% in Sweden (Knijn, Martin and Millar, 2007). It appears that in some countries being a non-employed lone-parent does not automatically mean you will be poor. Secondly being employed does not automatically mean a lone-parent family will *not* be poor. The rise of precarious jobs and low-paid work, particularly in the service sector and among younger workers, has created a new category of ‘working poor’ (Peña-Casas and Latta, 2004). And to the extent that single mothers are disproportionately represented among those taking such jobs, employment – even full-time and full-year – could still leave lone-parent families “being over-represented among the poorest households” (Chambaz, 2001: 667). In a recent report, the OECD documents an overall increase in lone parents’ employment (OECD, 2011: Chapter 6). Across the whole OECD, the employment rate of lone parents rose from 67% to 71% between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s (OECD, 2011: 238). However this trend has not been followed by a proportional decrease in lone parents’ poverty in the OECD.

There are considerable differences in terms of full-time and part-time employment practices of single mothers in European countries as well. In Netherlands, more than fifty per cent of lone parent mothers work part-time while 80% per cent of mothers work flexible hours in Sweden [refs; what do we mean by ‘flexible hours’ here]. Different employment patterns are supported by combinations of public policies that vary widely between countries.

Poverty of lone-parent families is clearly also related to the gender inequalities in the labour market. Numerous studies identify a significant difference between the low-income rates of families headed by women as opposed to men, with the latter being significantly less likely to be poor (Eydoux and Letablier, 2007: 44). Such observations drawn attention to other explanatory elements as they make clear that the high rates of poverty among lone-parent families are due to more than just (non-)participation in the labour market. Since lone-parent

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<sup>5</sup> Since the mid-1990s the overriding policy goal in the UK has become to move parents into employment with various programs pushing them “from welfare to work”[refs?].

families are overwhelmingly female-headed and there remains a considerable gender gap between male and female wages,<sup>6</sup> the high rate of poverty among female-headed single-parent families is at least in part the result of unequal gender structures in the labour force (Bradshaw and Chzhen, 2009).

In addition to gender inequalities in the labour market unequal care responsibilities and the reconciliation of employment and family life tasks disproportionately affect and complicate the lives of single mothers. As a result, public policies facilitating reconciliation of work and family-life and childcare policies are likely to have a significant impact on lone parents' employment opportunities and types of jobs available to them.

The centrality of welfare state programs in reducing market-generated inequalities and in mitigating the income consequences of lone-parenthood has been demonstrated by studies that examine how social policies influence cross-national variation in children's, women's, single mothers', and overall poverty (Huber et al., 2009; Misra et al., 2007; Moller et al., 2003; Rainwater and Smeeding, 2004). Such studies show that social policy has a major effect on single parents' income security, as governments choose or not to reshape the effects of labour markets (Brady 2009; Heuveline and Weinshenker 2008). For instance, Chzhen and Bradshaw (2012) demonstrate that child poverty rates in single-parent families vary considerably before and after social transfers in 27 members of EU countries. According to their findings those transfers are most effective in reducing poverty in the UK, Iceland, Hungary, Ireland, Denmark and Finland, lowering the child poverty rate in lone parent families by 50 percent or more. These studies indicate that welfare state and regime have significant impact on lone parent poverty as well and thus need to be taken into consideration.

If anything, this literature review suggests that lone-parent family poverty is likely the result of a complex interaction of multiple social and political factors. In what follows we will analyze trends in the Netherlands from this multidimensional perspective, paying particular attention to the intersection of its welfare regime and its gender regime.

## **Lone Parent Families in Netherlands from the 1980's to the 2000's**

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<sup>6</sup> The gender pay gap in the European Union is still 17%. See European Commission. 2011. *The situation in the EU*. Retrieved on July 12, 2011. Available at [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-pay-gap/situation-europe/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-pay-gap/situation-europe/index_en.htm).



Since 1980s the percentage of single-parent families has increased dramatically in Netherlands. According to OECD data (OECD, 2011: 238) the proportion of people living in sole-parent families doubled from mid-1980s to 2008. Single-parent families as a proportion of all families with dependent children also nearly doubled from 8% in 1981 to close to 16% in 2002, stabilizing thereafter (Knijn and van Wel, 2001a; Knijn and Van Berkel, 2003). What is striking is the change in the ways that these types of families are produced. From 1981 to 1997, the proportion of those widowed among lone parents decreased from 27% to 3% while the proportion that never married doubled from 10 to 22.5%. The proportion of divorced or separated single parent families increased to from 62% in 1981 to 74.5% in 1997 (ibid.). Moreover, in 2001 no less than 88% of single-parent families were headed by women (Lehmann and Wirtz, 2004).

The data on lone-parent families in Netherlands closely conforms to the findings of the new social risks literature. The proportion of single-parent families has increased significantly and the ways in which they were created have also changed with rising rates of divorce, cohabitation and other changes to social norms. Single-parent families are overwhelmingly female-headed.

When we look to the employment trends of single parents in Netherlands, we observe an even more dramatic increase in the employment rate of lone parents, from 25% in the mid-1980s to 76.2% in 2008. During the 1990's the employment rate of lone mothers—as opposed to lone *parents*—has increased substantially as well, from 30% in 1992 to 54% Knijn and Van Berkel, 2003: 91). But when we look more closely at the employment patterns we find that a large proportion of this increase is due to lone mothers working part-time. The part-time employment rate of single mothers with a child under 6 increased from 9.9% in 1984 to 31.5% in 1999 (OECD 2001: 135).<sup>7</sup> In terms of hours worked per working week, 66% of single mothers worked less than 35 hours per week in 2002 (Knijn and Van Berkel, 2003: 91). When we consider that the overall employment rate for women in the Netherlands grew from 40% in 1985 to 63% in 2000, the increase in the employment rate of lone mothers is quite similar to that of all Dutch women. But the relatively sharp upward trend in the employment rate of single mothers in the Netherlands contrasts sharply with trends in other countries. Thus, the lone parent employment rate in the UK actually *fell* UK from 54% in mid 1980s to 48% in mid 2000s, while those rates

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<sup>7</sup> Part-time employment refers to working less than 30 hours per week.

remained stable at a very high level (over 77%) in France and at a somewhat lower level (around 55%) in Germany. Across the whole OECD the employment rate of lone parents rose moderately from 67% to 71% between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s (OECD, 2011: 238).

But increased participation in the labour force does not appear to have reduced poverty among single-parent families in the Netherlands. Quite the contrary, it seems. Between the mid-1980s and 2008 the poverty rate of Dutch lone-parent families actually more than doubled from 14.4% to 31.2% (OECD, 2011: 238). These are figures based on disposable incomes, that is, household incomes *after* taxes and transfer payments. That is to say, the poverty rate of single-parent families in the Netherlands has doubled *in spite of* the well-documented mitigating effect that taxes and transfers have on poverty rates (see, e.g., Förster, 1994; 2000; Heuveline and Weinshenker, 2008; Raiq and van den Berg, 2014, van den Berg and Raiq, 2014). Meanwhile, the poverty rates for children of single-mother families has remained very high since the early 1990s in the Netherlands, hovering around 30 to 35%.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Netherlands saw a considerable increase *both* in employment *and* in poverty among lone-parents during period since about 1980. The coincidence of these two trends in the Netherlands is puzzling. While the employment rate of lone parents almost tripled, we see a deterioration of the situation of lone-parent families. Why has the situation of Dutch lone parents deteriorated so much in spite of the fact that they have dramatically increased their participation in the labour market from the 1980s to the 2000s? To find a plausible answer to this question we need to consider the intersection between the welfare and the gender regimes in the Netherlands.

### **Continuity and Change in the Welfare Regime: A Multidimensional Approach**

Increasingly social policy analysts have begun to ask whether welfare regimes are continuing on the same trajectory or shifting path as they adapt their policies and programmes to new social risks and new economic conditions. This question is, however, relatively new. Much previous work stressed instead the institutionalisation of trajectories, even in the face of new political challenges and governmental promises.

In the early 1990s, scholars, such as Pierson and Esping-Andersen,<sup>9</sup> claimed that

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Luxembourg Income Studies Employment Key Figures by Gender, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Esping-Andersen has moved away from this more static explanation of institutional continuity in more recent publications. See Esping-Andersen et al. (2002).

organized interests and institutions accounted for the stability and continuity they observed in social policy. For example, the interests groups and organizations that had formed around post-war social policies were able to block the spending cuts proposed by the New Right governments of Reagan and Thatcher in the US and the UK (Pierson 1994: 8-9). The research on ‘retrenchment’<sup>10</sup> focusing on spending on different programs such as old-age pensions or housing policy has tended to show that social programs have not been dismantled, contrary to neo-liberal policy preferences and the political aims of New Right governments (Pierson, 1994; Stephens, Huber and Ray, 1999). Pierson claimed that interests and institutions based on beneficiary groups whose interests depend on welfare state programs contributed to “a dominant pattern of continuity in social policy” (1994:179). Institutions limited the capacity of these governments to make the cuts they had promised. Electoral incentives and ‘institutional stickiness’ have been identified as the sources of the welfare state’s strength and resilience in the face of exogenous factors such as globalization and endogenous changes such as post-industrialization.

But recently scholars such as Bonoli and Natali (2012) have begun to argue that the theoretical tools developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s are inadequate to account for key developments shaping the social policy landscape in European countries today. The principal analytical tool used in previous work consisted of measuring the overall level of welfare effort by a single dimension such as social expenditures as a percentage of GDP or replacement ratios of social transfer benefits. Using such tools and indicators one can only observe either expansion or retrenchment, or, of course, stability.

However, critics maintain, there are important policy developments shaping the policy mix of European welfare states that cannot be adequately captured by only focusing on a single dimension. Instead, Bonoli and Natali (2012) insist that we need to recognize the multidimensional character of the process of welfare regime change. They argue that the analysis of current change should involve a combined effort of analyzing the traditional quantitative dimension, the relative balance between passive and active measures and the extent to which welfare provisions are encompassing or limited towards specific segments of the population. Moreover, they argue that beyond these three aspects multidimensionality may involve important

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<sup>10</sup> Pierson argue about ‘new politics’ because the retrenchment is a distinctive process according to him compare to the long phase of welfare state expansion (Pierson, 1998)

dimensions of differentiation in social policies, such as the defamilization dimension emphasized by Lister (2000).

We propose that the patterns of lone-parent families can be understood by applying a two-dimensional analysis, focusing on the intersection of welfare and gender regimes in order to account for changes in Netherlands since 1990s. We analyze the welfare regime in terms of the well-established distinction between ‘Bismarckian’ and ‘Beveridgean’ models. Bismarckian regimes can be characterised as using social insurance, providing earnings-related benefits with entitlements conditional on contributions by employers and employees so as to achieve status maintenance among the beneficiaries. The Beveridgean model, on the other hand, focuses on preventing poverty, and providing access based on residence and need, typically financed through general taxation (Bonoli, 1997: 357).

Gender regimes have been classified according to a range of characteristics (Walby, 2004: 7). Here we classify the gender regime according to the norms and policy approaches toward both women’s employment (promoting equality in labour force participation or accepting a gender-divided labour market) and parenting (equal parenting or mother-focused parenting).

### **The Dutch Hybrid Regime Changing Course: Single-Parent Families at the Intersection of two Dimensions**

Comparative welfare state researchers usually classify the Netherlands as a Continental, Bismarckian, Conservative or Christian- Democratic welfare state, these terms being largely interchangeable (van Kersbergen, 1995; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997; Bonoli, 1997 and Ferrera, 1996). However several scholars argue that the Dutch welfare state does not fit very comfortably into Esping-Andersen’s (1990) three-regime classification of liberal, social democratic and conservative welfare regimes (see, e.g., Knijn and van Wel, 2001b; Arts and Gelissen, 2002; Hemerijck, 2003; Goodin, 1999). Instead, they view the Dutch welfare regime as a “hybrid” combining traits of conservative/Bismarckian types and the social-democratic/Beveridgean type.

Hemerijck and Marx (2010) argue that the social security system of the Netherlands reflects this mixed design of Bismarckian and Beveridgean structures. The social protection system is based upon employee insurance against occupational risk financed by earmarked

contributions of employers and employees (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010: 131). Trade unions and employers' associations play an important role in the administration of social security institutions (Yerkes, 2011). The main social programs offering protection against income loss due to unemployment and sickness risks aim at income replacement and are directed towards the male breadwinner, supporting the traditional family structure. These aspects of the Dutch social protection system are all eminently Bismarckian (Yerkes and van der Veen, 2011).

On the other hand, the Netherlands' traditionally rather generous tax-funded social assistance and basic old-age pension systems reflect a Beveridgean approach directed towards ensuring adequate income for citizens in need (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010). The social assistance safety net for citizen with insufficient means dates from the 1960s. The Dutch pension system consists of three pillars combining Beveridgean and Bismarckian components (Yerkes and van der Veen, 2011; Hemerijck and Marx, 2010).

As for the gender regime, the Netherlands has traditionally followed the Christian-democratic approach in support of the male breadwinner model and a traditional division of labour between men and women. As Knijn and Van Wel (2011b) point out social services have tended to be underdeveloped in Netherlands reinforcing the male breadwinner model through a paternalist welfare state. This is most apparent in the underdevelopment of childcare services. As a result, until the 1990s the labour-market participation of women has traditionally been quite low compared to other industrialized countries, as the Netherlands lacked the parental leave programs a maternity leaves with moderate coverage found elsewhere (Visser, 2002).

But by the early 1980s, both the income security programs and the gender regime came under increasing pressure for reform. Following the 1981-82 recession, rising long-term unemployment combined with relatively accessible and generous sickness, disability, unemployment and social assistance programs produced a crisis convincing policy makers across the political spectrum that the Netherlands' social expenditures had become unsustainable and needed urgent reform (Yerkes, and van der Veen, 2011). This wide political consensus enabled the Dutch government to engineer a political compromise centred on a social pact involving union acceptance of wage restraint and social program reform in exchange for a "cost-neutral" reduction of working hours and job sharing (Visser and Hemerijck, 1999; Hemerijck and Marx, 2010: 132).

In the wake of this grand compromise, a series of welfare reforms was implemented from

the early 1990s to the 2000s by consecutive coalition governments that transformed the Dutch welfare state. The reforms of the early 1990s primarily aimed at cost containment of the welfare state expenditures. This aspect is most apparent in the programmatic changes in the Dutch sickness and disability benefits programs<sup>11</sup> which had grown very large indeed.<sup>12</sup> After early attempts to reduce the maximum durations and benefit levels of these programs did not produce the expected results, a major overhaul of the social security system followed in 1993 (Yerkes, M. and van der Veen, 2011). This reform restructured the disability benefits program, tightening its eligibility rules so as to restrict benefits to the truly incapacitated only. These changes reflected the more general changes that occurred in Dutch social security as a result of which Dutch social spending as a percentage of GDP fell from over 25% in the 1980s to around 20% by the late 2000s (OECD, 2012), causing the Netherlands to drop from the third or fourth highest spender in the OECD to the middle of the pack.

As was the case in other Bismarckian systems, even in the 1980s women's participation in the Dutch labour force was among the lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2007). In accordance with the social norm of stay-at-home mothers, generous subsidies and social assistance benefits permitted lone-parents (most of whom were mothers) to follow the pattern of mothers in coupled families and remain out of the labour force to care for their children. The low labour force participation of women, including lone mothers, was reinforced by cultural beliefs embedded in the corporatist welfare regime that there was an appropriate gender division of labour between male employment and female care-giving (Kramer, 2002; Knijn and Kramer, 1997).

But by the early 1990s policy makers came to view the country's low labour force participation rates as the "Achilles heel" of the passive Dutch welfare system ( Hemerijck and Marx, 2010: 133). This led to the introduction of a series of activation programmes in order to increase the employment starting from the mid-1990s (Bonoli, 2013). This involved major change in the Beveridgean components of the regime, particularly social assistance, which had become a programme of last resort as various insurance-based protections became harder to obtain. A major reform in 1996 made participation in activation programmes compulsory for

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<sup>11</sup> Disability insurance became a means to an end for dealing with the (long-term) unemployed as well as a means for employers to dispose of unwanted older workers while avoiding strict dismissal rules. This led to what was thought to be an excessive number of benefit claimants (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> The number of disability claimants reached one million in 1989, out of an adult population of seven million, provoking much media coverage and criticism from right-wing politicians (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010).

virtually all recipients (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010: 134). The reform linked social assistance to the individual minimum wage with single parent households receiving a maximum of 70% of the minimum wage.

Since the mid-1990s, active labour market policies were introduced especially for low-skilled workers, women, younger workers and the long-term unemployed (Yerkes and van der Veen, 2011). A principal aim of Dutch labour market policy in this period was to increase the flexibility of the labour market (Yerkes, 2011). Among other things, this meant strengthening the legal framework supporting temporary and part-time work and providing security for those working in atypical forms [add refs]. Tax reforms increased incentives for women, even if their partners were high earners, to take up – usually part-time – work.

The 1996 reform required mothers to seek work once their youngest child reached age five. This change was enacted both in the name of reforming social policy and promoting women's labour market participation (van Wel and Knijn, 2001: 804). With this reform, it became possible to insist that all lone parents, who constituted about 27% of all social assistance recipients, seek work. They also became eligible for additional incentives to increase the likelihood of employment such as an employment-conditional tax credit.

At virtually the same time that these activation strategies were put into place, a reform of the gender regime in the direction of shared parenting was underway – a model that has been termed the “combination scenario.” It was promoted in a report by a coalition of employers, employees, political parties and feminist academics as the appropriate way to achieve three goals: gender equality, work-family balance, and social care for children. Rather than high-quality child care services, this combination scenario was based on three principles: “a) reduction of paid work to an average of 32 hours a week for every individual adult, b) sharing of paid work and unpaid care responsibilities in individual households, and c) outsourcing of a small part of care to services....” (Knijn and Saraceno, 2010: 449). The combination scenario took concrete legal form in 2001 with the adoption of the Act on Work and Care.<sup>13</sup> The law did successfully prompt social change: the Netherlands has one of the highest male take-up rates for parental leaves (Knijn and Saraceno, 2010: 449) and also one of the highest male part-time employment rates in the OECD (OECD, 2007:66). But women's rate of part-time employment also increased from the already high rate of the 1980s (OECD, 2011: 34).

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<sup>13</sup> Wet Arbeid en Zorg 2001.

All these reforms pushing for higher female employment rates and modifications of the gender regime towards equality in the 1990s depended on having child care. In 1996, only 10% of pre-school children had a daycare space (van Wel and Knijn, 2001: 805). Childcare financing was overhauled, so as to increase supply by means of demand-driven tax credits. As a result, by the middle of the first decade of this century, participation of children under three in childcare had increased to 30%, well above the OECD average (OECD, 2007: 135). Lone-parents could also claim additional benefits to allow them to use child care services.

### **The Unintended Consequences of Regime Reform**

So how can this brief overview of welfare state and gender regime reforms in the Netherlands help us explain the paradoxical concurrence of rapidly rising employment rates and rising poverty rates for single-mother families? The response developed in the Netherlands to the new social risks, though somewhat belated, was very similar to the responses in other advanced countries, consisting of a greater emphasis on activation accompanied by provision of services facilitating female labour force participation. These shifts in the welfare regime intended to provide a measure of income security helps to account for the rapid increase in lone parents' employment rate. Multiple incentives as well as requirements imposed on them have generated this dramatic shift. But these changes occurred in the context of a particular gender regime that was itself undergoing a major transformation. It is the interaction between the two that may help us to understand the rising poverty rate of lone-parent families *in spite of* their increased participation in the labour force.

Prior to the reforms briefly described above, single mothers had benefited from the general protection of “motherhood” in Dutch culture and the Bismarckian institutions supporting it: “Under this regime, full-time motherhood was protected within marriage by generous provisions for male breadwinners and outside marriage by rather generous social assistance benefits for single mothers” (van Wel and Knijn, 2001: 804). In other words, single mothers were encouraged to stay at home to care for their children rather than join the labour force by the relatively generous social assistance benefits that prevented many of them from landing in poverty.

But social attitudes towards single mothers began to change during this period. By the mid-1990s, observers claim that being a lone parent was considered by many in the Netherlands



to be "... a self-selected life style which no longer requires social protection' (Bussemaker *et al.*, 1997: 116). While the formulation may be somewhat stark, such a change in attitude would help explain the willingness of Dutch social program reformers to include lone parents in the new activation programmes and to insist on employment rather than fulltime parenting. The same was being promoted for women living in couples, after all.

This much is broadly in keeping with the general shift to more activating social protection in other advanced welfare states. But these activating reforms took place in the context of a gender regime characterized by a peculiarly Dutch mix of gender egalitarianism and familialist traces of a Christian-democratic legacy, retaining a long-standing cultural commitment to parental childcare. Out of this mix came a series of policies supporting the so-called "combination scenario," intended to promote the sharing of both employment and childcare between the parents of two-parent families but ill-suited for the needs of single parents. While the incentives and resources promoting the combination scenario favoured a sharing arrangement between parents of two-parent families in which each works four days per week and using non-parental child care only three days a week, such a solution is by definition not available for single mothers. Thus, if single mothers are to conform to cultural norms that favour substantial amounts of parental care they have no choice but to work part-time, short-hour jobs only. In addition, female lone-parents in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, tend to have relatively low educational and training credentials which further limits their access to lower paying jobs only. As a result, they must work longer hours in order to earn adequate income: "less educated lone mothers need to work full-time in order to have any financial advantage (over social assistance), and that is exactly what most of them do not want" (Knijn, Martin, and Millar, 2007: 645). Thus, the Dutch response to the dilemmas of the new social risks not only came late but inadvertently took a form that led to a significant deterioration of the situation of single parents.

In other words, the *combination* of a shift towards activation and the concomitant reduction of the generosity of social assistance and other 'passive' benefits, on the one hand, with a refurbishing of the old gender regime along intendedly more egalitarian principles may have improved the material situation and work-life balance for parents of two-parent families but had the unintended effect of making life a lot harder for single parents. While the new combination of policies provided two-parent families with the incentives and services that enabled them combine parental childcare with part-time employment, they did not enable single

parents to find and hold down the full-time jobs that might have lifted them out of poverty.

At this point we do not (yet) have the solid empirical evidence that would be necessary to support our explanation of the Dutch single-parent employment/poverty paradox. Such evidence would include a comparison of poverty rates of part-time and full-time single parents over time which would allow us to estimate the contribution made to the rise in the single-parent poverty rate by the growth of part-time employment among such parents. Ideally it would also include data on the proportion of single parents who work part-time *involuntarily* as this would be a gauge of the extent to which single parents feel compelled to take part-time rather than full-time employment because of the lack of institutional support for (daycare) and/or availability of full-time employment.

But a first look at some of the findings of other studies appear to provide some initial support for our hypothesis. Thus, for instance, while more than half of single parents with children between the ages of 0 to 14 years works in a full-time job in France and more than 60% does so in Sweden, the corresponding rate for the Netherlands is a mere 16%. Conversely, about half such parents work part-time (at 30 hours or less per week) in the Netherlands while the corresponding figures for France and Sweden are around 20%. And while the proportion of non-working single parents has traditionally been quite high in the Netherlands compared to other countries, it is now, at about one third, in line with the corresponding rates in France and Germany and considerably lower than the one for the UK which is close to 50%.<sup>14</sup> Even more starkly, Dutch single parents of very young children (between 0 and 2 years old) are about as likely to be not working as is the case in the four comparison countries but only half as likely to be working full-time and between twice and ten times as likely to be working part-time.<sup>15</sup> All this suggests, then, that Dutch single parents have increasingly found it necessary to work to make end meet but they have disproportionately done so by getting part-time rather than full-time employment. If we add to this the mounting evidence for a strong link between part-time employment and poverty, in the Netherlands as elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> our explanation for the Dutch paradox begins to appear quite plausible.

But what we cannot infer from these bits of somewhat circumstantial evidence is *how*

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<sup>14</sup> Here Sweden, the original home of ‘active labour market policy’ is the outlier with less than 20% of single parents with children between the ages of 0 and 14 not working.

<sup>15</sup> For the complete comparative data on which these remarks are based, see the tables in the Appendix below.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Snel, de Boom and Engbersen (20??), Horemans and Marx (20??).

*much* exactly the relative difficulties of Dutch single parents to take on full-time employment has contributed to the rise in their rates of poverty. For this we would need to have the data on relative poverty rates for single parents and working patterns over time that we alluded to earlier.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have addressed an apparent puzzle in poverty trends among single-parent, and even more so single-mother families in the Netherlands. During a period in which the labour force participation of (single) mothers rose dramatically the poverty rates for families led by those single mothers did as well. This coincidence of trends is all the more puzzling since the Netherlands largely pursued the same activating strategy as other advanced welfare states did in response to rise of so-called “new social risks”. To resolve this puzzle, we argued, one needs to apply a more multidimensional approach than has been customary in the comparative welfare state literature and, in particular, look at the interaction between welfare program reform and changes in the gender regime. After briefly reviewing the major policy reforms undertaken by successive governments in the Netherlands since the mid- to late-1980s, we proposed an explanation for the concurrent rises of the employment and poverty rates of single-parent families in the Netherlands since the 1980s. The rise of the single-parent poverty rate, we argued, is the unintended result of the coincidence of activating policies that restricted access to formerly relatively generous passive income support in favour of participation in the labour force with the implementation of a series of policies aiming to facilitate shared employment *and* parental among *two*-parent households. But while they facilitated such a ‘combination scenario’ for two-parent households they actually made it harder for single parents to take on full-time employment even as such parents’ access to relatively generous ‘passive’ welfare benefits were being curtailed. As a result, Dutch single parents were forced to take part-time employment rather than full-time jobs to a much greater extent than their counterparts in other comparable welfare states, limiting their earnings capacity in the context of a more activating regime, producing the rise in poverty rates we have observed.

Our explanation takes its inspiration from the recent trend in the comparative welfare state literature towards a more multidimensional approach. Rather than looking at changes in one policy, program or domain and attempt to explain changes in outcomes as a result, we would advocate trying to identify all major policies and policy domains that are likely to affect the

outcomes of interest and, more particularly, the *interaction* between those policies and domains. The policy outcomes we are generally interested are invariably the result of a complex of factors of which any one particular policy change is likely to be only one.

We need to end on the caveat, however, that at this point our explanation is only plausible at best. To be sure, the available data on patterns of employment of single parents in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and the well-documented link between poverty and part-time employment do seem to provide prima facie support for it. But we would need more precise information on the evolution of employment patterns and poverty rates of Dutch single parents and their counterparts in other advanced welfare state to clinch the matter. This is what we intend to do in a future iteration of this paper.

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## Appendix

**Table 1. Employment Rates, Single parents- Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden and UK<sup>17</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<i>Mid 1980s</i>	<i>Mid 2000s</i>	<i>2008</i>
<b>Netherlands</b>	%25	%67.2	%76.2
<b>Germany</b>	%54.9	%53.3	%56.9
<b>France</b>	%77.6	%77.8	-
<b>Sweden</b>	%91.7	%86.1	%84.2
<b>UK</b>	%53.6	%47.7	-

**Table 2. Poverty Rates, Single parents- Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden and UK<sup>18</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<i>Mid 1980s</i>	<i>Mid 2000s</i>	<i>2008</i>
<b>Netherlands</b>	%14.4	%36.7	%31.2
<b>Germany</b>	%37	%34.1	%26.5
<b>France</b>	%20	%19.3	-
<b>Sweden</b>	%6.8	%7.9	%17.9
<b>UK</b>	%25.1	%23.7	-

**Table 3. Employment patterns among sole-parent families with children aged 0-14, 2007**

	Full-time	Part-time	Not-working
Netherlands	%16.4	%49.5	%34.24
Germany	%28.5	%37	%34.5
France	%51.5	%19.8	%28.7
Sweden	%60.2	%20.9	%18.9
UK	%25.9	%26.9	%46.9

<sup>17</sup> OECD, 2011a: 238.

<sup>18</sup> OECD, 2011a: 238.