



Welfare to Work: Have Policy Initiatives, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents Impacted Upon the Experiences of Lone Mothers in Employment?

Sarah May McCulloch

Abstract

The current Labour government have set the target to have 70% of all lone parents (of which mothers make around 95%) into employment by 2010, it has introduced welfare to work policies to help achieve this target, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). This piece of research looks at the current employment status of a sample of lone mothers and explores whether such policy initiatives have had an impact on their lives in regards to employment. Overall it was found that there may be issues regarding the success of the programme with at present not being able to make lone mothers aware of it in the first place. However, the deal itself was associated with various positive outcomes on mothers employment status. Employment of lone mothers is a complex topic, they make a diverse social group, government and other relevant organisations have to bare this in mind when designing such employment policies directed at lone mothers in future.

Research Problem

The current Labour government have set the target to have 70% of all lone parents in employment by 2010, in a bid to reduce poverty in lone parent headed families, which has received increasing government attention over the years due to comparably high rates in the UK, along with high rates of child poverty. The welfare to work policy drive has thus aimed to reduce obstacles for lone parents finding and maintaining employment and providing a route out of poverty. It is estimated that lone mothers' household income is on average less than half that of two parent families (Ginn 2003: p4). These differences in household income between coupled and lone parent headed households have been accounted for by differences in employment, for instance higher

numbers of lone parents are out of work and in receipt of benefits or working part time and in lower paid jobs.

There are currently around 1.8 million lone parent families in the UK; out of these fewer than 170,000 are lone fathers. It is thus apparent that the overall majority of lone parent families consist of mothers, which means that policies directed at lone parents will ultimately have a disproportionately greater impact on the lives of lone mothers, which is one reason that prompted the research to focus on lone motherhood specifically. Past research has tended to focus around issues such as why mothers do or do not choose to find paid employment and the possible implications of working with regards to the work/ family balance; however there seems to be less literature surrounding the more recent Labour initiatives such as the welfare to work strategy, specifically the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). This research seeks to shed light on the NDLP alongside mothers' experiences in employment with regards to such policy initiatives. Initiatives such as the NDLP claims to support mothers in finding employment, but to what extent do mothers make use of this support and what impact does it have, or is perceived to have on their employment outcomes?

The following three objectives were set early on in the research;

- To explore and analyse the recent literature and government policies surrounding lone mothers today;
- Assess how the mothers make use of the NDLP as support for finding employment and to assess its impact on the lives of the mothers; and
- To speak with lone mothers themselves to highlight what issues in employment are salient to them, and how employment impacts upon their financial position

Lone Mothers in Context.

Britain has witnessed a growth in the number of lone parents, the proportion has grown from nearly 474,000 in 1961 to 1.7 million by 1997 (Ginn 2003:3). There have also been increases in Europe and other industrialised countries, for instance in Germany the number of single parent families has more than doubled over the past two decades (Duncan & Edwards 1997). There are various causes for this increase, general demographic changes show that more people are cohabitating, getting married later, having fewer children and are more likely to get divorced or separated (Rowlingson & McKay 1998), resulting in more women at some point in their lives making up the population of lone mothers. It tends to be for many a transitional grouping, for instance on average a lone mother will only stay 'lone' for 4.6 years before re-partnering or re-marrying and around three quarters of lone parents will re-partner to form a step family. This illustrates how as a social group there is much movement in and out; it is not a stable or a permanent status for the majority of mothers. It is stated that there is no characteristic lone mother (Rowlingson & McKay 1998); they will differ with regards to

age, educational background and/or circumstances in which they became a lone parent. This has various implications on their employment status, mothers without educational qualifications are more likely to be in lower paid jobs and are likely to lead a different life to those educated to a degree level with regards to career prospects, for instance (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005).

Within the area of sociology of the family, many have written about the idea, existence and frequently the decline of what has been coined the 'nuclear family', typified in what we understand as a modern society. The idea of the male breadwinner/ worker and the female homemaker/ carer was submersed into western society as the normal form of familial relations between men and women (Cheal 2002). This model of the 'male breadwinner' has been used by Lewis (1997, cited by Kilkey 2000; p58) in an analysis of the welfare state, this typology shows how the state is built upon this notion of the male as the worker.

It has however been increasingly documented over the past 20 years in sociological literature that the family has become more fragmented and diverse in its structures and forms, that the ideal of a 'golden age' of the family is inaccurate, changes that have occurred in the family as an institution are an ongoing process rather than a sharp discontinuation from the past (Cheal 2002). Davies *et al* (1993) states that undoubtedly there has been a decline of the nuclear family over the last generation, and somewhat pessimistically comments that this is a major cause of rising crime and instability in society, that the decline of the family is in his view due to the '*seductive forces of the market and the media*' (1993: p7). He posits that government should do more to ensure the survival of the nuclear family, which he sees as providing the best stability and freedom in society, through such measures as making it harder for couples to divorce for instance.

There is a debate surrounding what the government's role should be with regards to responding to this argument around the disintegration of the 'traditional' family between the political right and those who advocate more socially democratic political beliefs. For instance, it is claimed that those on the right believe in the sanctity of marriage and that unorthodox forms of families, such as lone parent households in their opinion, should be discouraged (Giddens 1998). On the other hand the social democratic left tend to believe that diversity in contemporary families is a healthy manifestation of the choice and diversity we have in society, that families such as those headed by a single mother, should thus be accepted by society. Today, Labour have been associated with promoting and advocating the 'third way', which has seen the taking up of both left and right positions (Driver & Turner 2002:67)

These political opinions apply differing discourses when approaching the debate of lone mother families, for instance Murray is associated with viewing lone mothers in relation to what Duncan & Edwards (1999) term the discourse of 'social threat', that lone mothers contribute to crime in society through the weakening of social bonds that the traditional two parent family are best able to provide. He has called this group of people in society as making up the 'underclass', this discourse is very negative towards the

existence of lone mothers, it can also be likened to that which Davies et al (1993) adopts. On the other hand, the discourse that viewed lone mothers as a 'social problem' essentially valued them as wanting to work and be better able to provide for their children but could not due to external, structural constraints, like for example there not being enough jobs in the labour market or too many that are poorly paid. Using this discourse, it can be seen that the onus to find employment thus is somewhat shifted away from the mothers and moved onto wider structural inefficiencies and limitations with this competing discourse.

It has been argued that there is now a more fluid nature of social bonds and relationships in society, reflected in the higher rates of lone parent households as a result of divorce or separation for instance. The increase in lone mothers can be linked to the fragmenting process, which theorists of a post modernist perspective claim to have already occurred in society. Postmodern theorists, such as Lyotard (cited in Irvine, 2003) for instance, comment that postmodernity brings about a rejection of the meta narratives, that dominant discourses such as religion or the belief in one ideal form of familial relations have broken down to form a diversity of alternative identities and consequently family type units.

Giddens (1992, cited by Duncan *et al* 2003) talks about the changes in personal and intimate relationships by referring to what he defines as the search for 'pure relationships', that people become less willing to remain in an intimate relationship if they aren't receiving enough satisfaction from it and so will remain in the relationship as long as they're happy. This has implications for the emerging structures of the family, for instance the rise in the number of couples co habiting instead of marrying and the number of couples separating or divorcing could be attributed to this notion of searching for 'pure relationships'. This is also linked to the process of individualisation in modern post industrial society.

Individualisation has been written about by various theorists when referring to the idea of changing social and personal ties/ relationships. It is used to refer to a shift in the way individuals make decisions in life; it's claimed they are no longer influenced by societal expectations but make choices based on their own immediate situation (Cheal 2002). It has been attributed to the increasing complexity of family life, ideas around relationships, for instance having a life long partner, have fundamentally changed. The consequences this is thought to have upon lone mothers is that they now have more freedom to choose their own lifestyle and what life path to go down rather than following predetermined gendered roles, for instance they can choose whether to go into the labour market and work or remain in receipt of benefits and stay at home to care for their child.

The theorist Ulrich Beck (2001) also comments upon the notion of individualisation. He claims that we now live in a society characterised by what he calls 'reflexive modernisation' which as part of this process, individualisation assumes individuals life biographies are no longer determined or written by society, for example by religion or the state but rather have to be chosen by the individual (Beck 2001). Among these

theories which seem to situate lone motherhood in the context of it being an active lifestyle choice are implications around discourses of power. Many lone parent households live in relative poverty in the UK; these levels tend to be higher than in other European countries, it has been stated due to having comparably higher rates of lone mothers to start with, but also due to less child care facilities. In Scandinavian countries for instance, it's claimed that care is more affordable and easily accessible, hence there are higher numbers of women in the labour market (Carling, 2002)

If we are to say that mothers choose lone motherhood as a lifestyle choice, as a consequence does this mean they choose to live in poverty and we can accept that in society, or as some claim, poverty is placed on women who choose lone motherhood? In countries such as Sweden, there are lower rates of lone parents living in poverty reflected by the fact that lone parents earn around 75-80% the income that two parent households do, this figure is sizeably lower in the UK (Hunsley 1997:121). It could be inferred then that lone mother headed families do not have to live in poverty in society, that perhaps the degree to which society accepts them determines or influences the type of life they lead, for instance living in poverty. Introducing welfare to work policies has been seen as an example of government intervening to lift these families out of poverty through employment and other associated benefits, such as the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC). Poverty has also been strongly linked with the health of lone mothers, accounting for around 50% of their health problems in the UK, compared to just 3- 13% in Sweden for instance (Whitehead *et al*, 2000) Along with poverty it is claimed that factors such as joblessness contributes to poor health, a further incentive for government to promote welfare to work policies

Feminist contribution to this issue of gender and the welfare state intervention is important to mention as it has implications surrounding the current welfare to work policies directed at lone parents. The concept of de-commodification has been used by Esping Andersen in his analysis of welfare states; it refers to the extent that social rights free individuals from reliance on the market, which feminist critics claim is gender blind in its analysis (Kilkey, 2000). Feminist contributors have argued that independence from male control rather than the market that is imperative to their emancipation. The market can provide them with income (through employment) which gives them more power over resource distribution in the family or can give them the opportunity to leave an unsatisfactory relationship (Hobson, cited in Kilkey 2000), and become a lone parent for instance. Although, it creates dependence on the market as waged workers, it allows them freedom from male control, it is often stated that women's income can significantly drop upon splitting with a partner, contrary to the male partner's/ husbands (Kiernan, 1998). The state's role in intervening is also of importance, for instance by designing policies to allow more women into the workplace, through such things as childcare subsidies or benefit incentives such as the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), enables women to become commodified and have the opportunity for increased economic independence.

The issue of lone mothers and their active decision to take paid employment has been theorised by Giddens (1997, cited by Klett- Davies 2005) who writes about lone mothers

and their decisions involved in being in work or choosing benefits. He uses two concepts; self – actualisation and empowerment to show that levels of these differ with regards to lone mothers alongside class divisions and gender inequalities. He claims that lone mothers can be divided into 2 groups, those on benefits ‘by choice’ and those ‘in poverty’. It could then be inferred that some mothers will have more opportunities than others, with regards to class, those from middle classes may possess a higher level of human capital and will be less likely to live poverty but also may choose to remain on benefits, their life on benefits may differ significantly to other mothers in receipt of them.

There has been a decided move in UK policy towards a stronger encouragement of getting mothers into employment and off of benefits. It has been claimed that there has been a shift from viewing them as mothers to regarding them as workers in policy and society. It is however also stated that these assumption shifts have been outpaced by what is actually happening in reality, that still mothers are not given the same opportunities as their male counterparts (Lewis, cited by Carling 2002). In Britain, government has refrained from implementing explicit policies that seek to protect the family or alternatives to it such as lone parent families; there is no government department for the family for instance, which makes public debate around the family less apparent in society. It is claimed that current labour policy towards lone mothers is one that not clear cut, Driver (2002:p208-9) states that *‘New Labour’s message seems to be: don’t become a lone parent and if you do, start supporting yourself as soon as possible’*. It seems that there is strong support for lone mothers going into the labour market and being more self supportive, however, eligibility on the NDLP is slightly more relaxed than on other new deals (being voluntary rather than compulsory), showing also a support of women as remaining at home, which highlights this tension between viewing lone mothers as workers and as mothers.

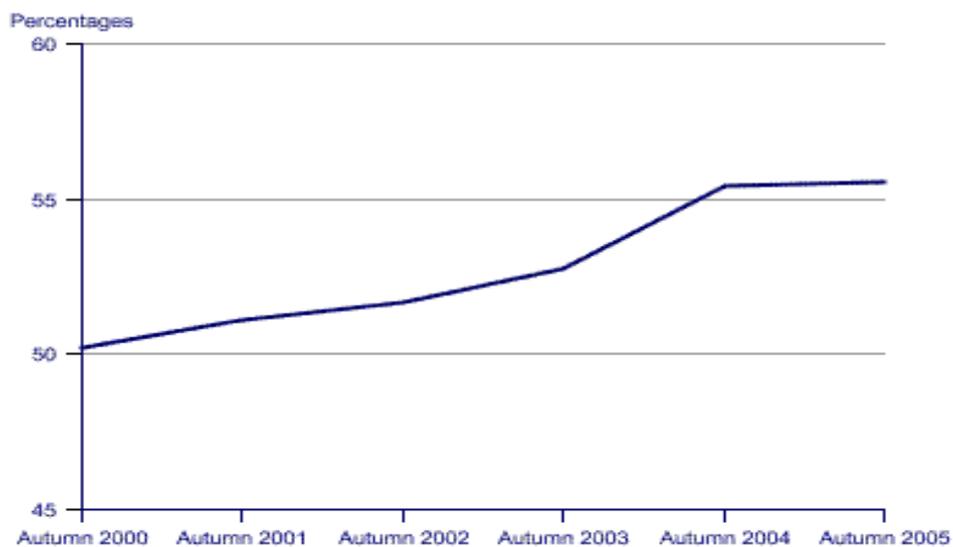
The authors Duncan and Edwards (1999) categorised three types of lone mothers in relation to how they view themselves in paid employment, for instance as ‘primarily mother’, ‘primarily worker’ or ‘mother/ worker integral’. From their research they conclude that mothers categorise themselves as either a worker first, a mother first (to which work interferes with caring responsibilities) or they view themselves as both a mother and worker, and that employment provides a means to an ends, that it will aid their caring duties by increasing their disposable income. They claim that when deciding to go into employment, the decision is inherently a moral one, as opposed to purely an economic decision weighing up the financial costs and benefits of working.

Changes in Policy: The Introduction of the Welfare to Work Policies.

There have been important changes in the welfare support system over the past 20 years in both the UK and within Europe. Most strikingly, there has been a decided shift in policies surrounding lone parenthood, with particular emphasis on the negative outcomes surrounding children from such families. Child poverty has also been a major topic of concern in the UK, due to its high rates in comparison to other industrialised

countries. The current government stated that their target of getting 70% of lone parents into employment would lift 300,000 children out of poverty (DWP, 2006). Policies with regard to lone parents in employment that have evolved in the UK under the 1997 Labour government have focused on the importance of reducing welfare dependency through the welfare to work initiatives. Statistics have reflected this as the number of lone parents in employment grew from 44% in 1997 to 50% in 2000. The concept of 'welfare dependency' emerged in political language under the New Labour government (Walker 1999). The introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and the extension of the minimum wage have all sought to improve the financial incentives to work for lone parents, the rationale behind this is that in the past it has been documented that lone mothers face low paid jobs with low satisfaction, thus resulting in a case of having a lack of reasons why they should work. Accompanying this drive there have also been policies aimed at reducing the obstacles into employment, such as by providing affordable and accessible childcare. These reforms have made a positive impact on the labour force market for lone parents, for instance, as Table 1 shows, the employment rate at present is around 55.5%, the highest yet.

Table 1 - Employment rates of working age people by lone parental status



The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was designed to allow the government to be proactive in ending the dependency culture (Field, cited by Duncan 2003). It was introduced within the first 18 months of Labours office in 1998 and has been seen as imitating policy and ideology surrounding the welfare state from the United States. For instance, in the US, a bid to 'end welfare as we know it' (Walker 1999:2) was introduced in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which sought to impose work requirements on those receiving welfare to which Walker (1999) claims related policies are being pursued in the UK in the form of the New Deals. Although the NDLP is not compulsory for lone parents, it is a step away

from beliefs that socialist policies will solve social problems and a shift towards the beliefs that market allocation should be allowed to intervene (Walker 1999)

NDLP has the aim of providing lone parents, in this case lone mothers, with financial information on what they would be expected to earn and what benefits they would still receive if in employment. The rationale behind this programme is that research shows that lone mothers in the majority want to be employed. A familiar statistic is that 80-90% of lone mothers claim to want to be in paid employment (Duncan and Edwards 1999) but face various barriers and insecurities due to a variety of reasons such as a low confidence, lack of information or disincentives to do so. It has been explicitly stated that the aim of the NDLP is to provide a '*voluntary programme that helps lone parents achieve job readiness through a range of provision*' (DWP, 2005:54). Each lone parent is assigned a personal advisor, who provides help in the form of going through their CV, preparing them for interviews, calculating how 'better off' they'll be in employment and in cases giving grants for things such as a new suit or transport to an interview.

It has been claimed to have has a positive impact on the employment activities and sustained employment of lone parents, for instance it's stated to provide 66% of those on it with a sustained job (DWP, 2005). However, the problems with the policy may lie in getting lone mothers on the programme initially. As Millar (2003, cited by DWP, 2003) comments, the NDLP has been successful at finding participants work, however it has had less success in getting them to take part. US authors, Schwartz and Handler (cited in Walker 1999), cite potential problems with focusing on the employment of lone parents. They claim that by making employment the 'litmus test' of contact between the state and the citizen, notions of the 'undeserving poor' may arise, making them more socially isolated or 'singled out'. Therefore there may be problematic implications around UK employment reforms in policy such as the aim to have 70% of all lone parents in employment by 2010.

There are also concerns around the NDLP policy and the moral implications of such welfare to work polices, in which case as Duncan and Edwards (1999:290) ask, is it right to force mothers into work when they may consider it morally wrong, they state that it could bare the risk of '*..fragmenting communities with socially cohesive norms about parenting and paid work*'. When norms around what is considered good parenting come into the picture, various ethical implications/ concerns are raised. It may be that mothers are compelled to take paid employment but would rather stay at home and care for their child.

There have been a number of changes to the economy, such as a rise in service sector jobs and the demand for flexible labour. It can be argued that this can have a large impact upon lone mothers in employment as they make up the highest level of part time workers and the highest number in service related jobs (need ref), which tend to be characterised as flexible labour due to shorter hours and shorter term contracts. An increase in the number of these types of jobs will ultimately result in more women working in them which may have implications around the amount of income they are

likely to earn, when considering the fact that these types of jobs tend to be less well paid.

Table 2 - Employment rates of lone mothers and married women 1990- 92 (%). Bryson et al 1997

	Full Time	Part Time	Total
Lone Mothers	17	24	41
Other Mothers	21	41	62

Table 2 shows the employment percentages of lone mothers and married or coupled ('other') mothers in the early 1990s, it highlights the differences in the numbers of women in part time and full time employment, whilst also showing the significant gap between the numbers of lone mothers and married or coupled mothers in employment, of which the latter group feature more in the labour market. Although these statistics were taken over 10 years ago and the current number of lone mothers in employment is higher today; patterns in the differences between lone mothers and other mothers still exist. For instance in 2003, 72% of married or co habiting mothers were in the labour market compared with 56% of lone mothers (ONS 2003). Reasons accounting for this difference is said to be due to factors such as having a shared household income and therefore being more able to afford formal childcare, an often cited obstacle to employment, they also the ability to split childcare, making work more feasible.

The literature presented here aims to situate lone mothers in the context of being the subject of various current government policies that have been directed at them. Employment polices in government rhetoric cite that working is the most effective and long term route out of poverty, the rationale behind it is that most mothers want to be in employment but face various obstacles such as childcare or a perceived financial disincentive, such as low paid work. The NDLP offers support to lone mothers that want to find work, the UK has witnessed a definite change in how lone mothers are viewed, although it was once not considered appropriate for the mother to work, such as policies during the post war period, it seems that Labour government are more in favour of them working full time and are trying to provide the support for them to do so but are also favouring the market in supplying the opportunities for mothers to support themselves. The following research aims to assess the potential successes of the NDLP programme and what possible problems it could present to achieving the 70% target of employment.

Methodology.

The research used semi-structured interviews rather than unstructured interviews in order to keep some form of agenda that would ensure questions intended to ask were done so. In these cases often the interviewer has a topic guide that is used to steer the interview, it is primarily used to ensure that all the intended issues are covered. However, the question structure was not rigid, questions varied in terms of the order

and even the addition of new questions in cases where the subject wanted to explore issues salient to them, these characteristics distinguish the in depth semi structured interview from those employed in quantitative methodology, such as questionnaires (Sarantakos, 1998).

Yates (2004) states that qualitative research positions embrace the '*open system-ness*' of social life (2004:135), which this research pursued through being able to engage with the mothers' experiences and opinions of the NDLP and the issues they've faced surrounding employment. The research sought insight from speaking with lone mothers and a policy advisor who has worked on the NDLP, in order to gauge their experiences and opinions and knowledge. It could be claimed that this study makes use of the interactionist tradition. As Silverman (2001:87) states in relation to this approach, '*the primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences*'. Thus rather than establish a narrative of the subject, the research set out to access the meanings that they attribute to experiences in their everyday lives and their social worlds, making the data meaningfully rich. Qualitative research methods, specifically those that make use of in depth interviews are being frequently used in social research, they offer a variety of advantages and whilst they can carry some limitations, such as genuine misrepresentation of facts or inability of the subject to offer information, other data collection research methods are often subject to the same problems (Sarantakos, 1998). In this piece of research, a qualitative approach was necessary due to the exploration into experiences and the aim of achieving an understanding of the subject's social world (i.e. how lone mothers make sense of the NDLP and their experiences with it). As Silverman (2000, p8) stated, researchers that employ qualitative methods often believe that they can '*provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena that would be obtained from purely quantitative data*'.

Sample.

Sample size in qualitative research has been claimed to be irrelevant in qualitative research, rather the sample sought after consists of '*theoretically important units*' (Sarantakos 1998:26). It is based around the principles of theoretical sampling rather than that of probability sampling, which relies more on the size of the sample to be statistically significant and representative of the wider population. In the course of the research, 5 people were interviewed, 1 of whom is a policy advisor who has worked for 5 years in the HM Treasury, specifically on the NDLP initiative during the implementation. Following this, 4 lone mothers were then interviewed, they were of varying ages and ethnic and cultural backgrounds, although all the mothers in this sample were born in the UK and could be classified as being of white ethnic origin. The researcher chose not to limit the sample by age or ethnicity, as lone mothers make a dynamic group; there is no characteristic lone mother, which became clear during the research as no one mother had completely similar life experiences. This was also chosen for practical reasons as the researcher felt it would be difficult if limited the sample in terms of accessing them. The definitions that surround lone motherhood and what it means are diverse. For the purpose of this study it was essential to define what

is understood as a lone mother, due to the variability in contexts and situations that can blur the boundaries of this concept, such as re partnering/ re marrying also seen as there is no one single definition in official terms (Rowlingson & McKay 1998). The research drew from Duncan & Edwards (1999) work to distinguish between 'single mothers' (those never married) and 'lone mothers' as a generic term, encompassing divorced, separated and widowed mothers. In this piece of research all the mothers spoke with could be placed under the latter category.

As became clear throughout the research, there were problems in accessing a sample of lone mothers that had experience of the NDLP. It was therefore necessary to explore the reasons why many of the mothers approached either had no experience of it or as one mother, had never heard of it, which added a new dimension to the nature of this research. Adjustments to the interviews and data collection were made during the research, because of this, it could be said that the research is based in grounded theory. This is often used in qualitative research as it allows for flexibility (Neuman 2000); it was thus able to pursue the research in a slightly different direction than was originally planned. The mothers that had not used the NDLP were thus informed of the aims and the processes involved and their opinions were gathered as to whether they think it would be of use to them and what impact they would perceive it to have on their lives. Their responses could be inferred upon to predict how useful they felt the NDLP would be to them, whether it is likely to be successful for them or not.

Accessing the Sample.

As mentioned above, the research encountered various obstacles to accessing a sample of lone mothers to interview, partly due to having to go through various professional gatekeepers (such as nursery groups and the Job Centre Plus) in order to access them. The local Job Centre Plus was firstly approached in order to gain access to lone mothers on the NDLP programme. However, due to data confidentiality issues, they were unable to refer anyone directly. They did however provide the researcher with contact details of some day care centres alongside contact details of the local Sure Start initiative, which proved to be useful. Due to issues of confidentiality it was unsurprising that they were reluctant, if unable to provide direct access to lone mothers, but using the contact details, the researcher pursued the local nurseries as well as the Sure Start. Some nurseries were reluctant to pass on details to mothers as they were unsure about the content of the research for ethical reasons. There were difficulties gaining a sample of lone mothers that was directly relevant to the research question, although all were in employment; all apart from one were not on the NDLP, the others were either considering using it or hadn't as yet. Of the mothers spoken to, one was already known to the researcher, who then provided another two contacts to speak with. A snowball sampling method for these mothers was applied. The remaining mother was contacted through a local nursery independent of the other mothers in the sample.

Carrying out the Interviews.

There were ultimately problems during the interviews regarding issues of sensitivity, for instance as Ford (1996:33) encountered during his research on lone mothers in employment, '*Discussions about family formation touch on sensitive and personal areas of people's lives...*' This discouraged some mothers from wanting to speak in the first place, however, in order to counter this was made clear that they could leave or not answer any questions they were not comfortable with. This was also salient for the policy advisor, who wanted to make clear that his views are different to official government stances; they were his own as opposed to being the official word from government. Confidentiality was also ensured and emphasised upon as some were concerned about making negative comments about their jobs or the child care they received. In order to try to get around this it was necessary to make clear that they were not going to be judged, and that all responses are confidential. Also, if they felt uncomfortable answering certain questions, for instance with regards to their employers or in one case their personal advisor, which touch on potentially sensitive or controversial, the question was left out of the interview.

The policy advisor was interviewed first, the reason being that it would create a solid basis to start from and inform the researcher of the nature of the NDLP along with the current and future directions of the policy towards lone parents in his opinion. The researcher then proceeded to speak with the lone mothers themselves, beginning with the one that had prior contact with, which carried various benefits due to the interviewee being relaxed and comfortable, also a degree of rapport was to some extent more easily attainable.

Practicalities.

All interviews were recorded onto tape as there was simply too much information to capture without one, due to it being in depth, most of the interviews took between 45 minutes to over an hour. Having a recoding of the interviews aided reliability, for instance as Silverman (2004) states, the quality of recordings and transcripts have important implications for reliability of the findings. It is stated that during in depth interviews, it is important to be an active listener, in these cases it wasn't possible or advisable to rely on memory alone, as it could be inaccurate and risk losing the meaning that came from the mothers themselves. It was also important to allow for silences or breaks in the conversation, as Ruane (2005) states, moments of silence during an in depth interview can be appreciated as moments of thoughtful reflection, and therefore it is vital the researcher does not interrupt these as they can yield important insights into the subjects meanings and thoughts.

Results.

The NDLP Policy.

From the initial interview with the policy advisor (PA) who worked on the NDLP programme during its implementation, various key points were drawn out, which could then be expanded upon with the lone mothers themselves. He was mainly involved with the marketing of the NDLP, making mothers aware and getting them to participate in it. It firstly emerged that there may be problems around increasing lone mother's awareness of the NDLP programme. It was claimed that government tried to remedy this lack of awareness through marketing campaigns

"DWP have done ongoing marketing. This ranges from leaflets in Jobcentres and GP surgeries, to national TV campaigns through outreach programs run by community groups, so there's been a range of awareness raising and marketing activities" (PA)

In spite of this it was stated that the NDLP compared to other New Deal programmes, such as the New Deal for Young People (NDYP) for instance, has a higher take up rate, perhaps reflecting the fact that the vast majority of lone mothers want to work.

"If you look at take up rates from the other new deals, the NDLP take up is high, bearing in mind it's voluntary as well" (PA)

He stated that from research conducted under his department, it emerged that most lone parents want to work but needed that extra support in doing so, which was supported in the literature. This was inherently the rationale behind the NDLP through providing the help of a personal advisor as a form of support that lone mothers claim to want when re - entering the labour market.

"Most research carried out shows that the majority of lone parents actually want to work, but don't due to the financial obstacles or their lack of confidence, which the NDLP seeks to counter" (PA)

"It (The NDLP) operates on the work first principle, getting people into work is the primary issue with the NDLP, making them see how they'll be better off in work rather than out" (PA)

Following on from the initial success of the, he stated that eligibility was extended through the introduction of the Work Focused Interview (LPWFI) in 2001, which made all claimants on Income Support (IS) eligible

The WFI was introduced so that more lone mothers could see how better off they would be in work; this was its primary aim (PP)

Although initially aimed at mothers with older children, it is currently also being extended to attract those mothers with younger children as well and the future of the programme will be aiming to target more of this group of mothers

We quickly realised that mothers with younger children also needed this support (PA)

The extension of who the NDLP is targeted at could be read as a sign of its success in helping lone mothers into employment. It also points towards the fact that in order for the 70% target to be met by 2010, more mothers have to be encouraged and given the support needed to work. It is claimed that mothers with younger children encounter more problems finding and remaining in employment, mainly due to childcare responsibilities. In regard to this he commented on governments drive to reduce obstacles to employment, such as improving access to affordable childcare

'We have provided more places nationally and benefits are designed to make work pay, so that they can afford childcare, so it is actually worthwhile to be in employment' (PA)

This point came out with the mothers as well; however it was less to do with childcare costs and availability per say and more to do the moral and personal implications of working. The majority of the mothers stated that employment wasn't an option when their child/ren were young, or pre school age. In the main it was once the children were a bit older that the mothers felt able to go into employment.

When XX was younger I didn't feel that I could pursue a full time career, although I had my family around a lot to help me, it would have meant that I would have hardly have seen her (1)

I've not made the decision to work full time yet, it wouldn't be right for either me or my son. Working part time allows me to spend time with him after school ...(3)

Although the cost of childcare was also a noted issue among the mothers

'I couldn't afford private day care for my child, it was too expensive. Luckily at the time I was at the college, and I used the crèche there which was a lot cheaper. Now he's at secondary school, I don't need to worry about that'(1)

All the mothers in the sample had made use of informal child care from their relatives at some point, some relied more on it than others, particularly when their children were younger. This shows the importance that mothers view informal care, it is a preferable alternative to formal care, in some cases they would not be able to work if it wasn't for this help. This shows that for the mothers in the sample, childcare for many is not affordable, rendering the possibility of employment difficult.

'I'm lucky I have really supportive parents, my mum helped me so much when I started working, she'd look after my son after school when he was too young to look after himself'(1)

If I didn't get help from my family, I'm not sure working as I am would be possible to be honest (2)

'I know I can always ask my mum to help out if I have to, I don't know what I'd do without her sometimes" (4)

Lone Mothers and the NDLP

When speaking to a mother who had recently been in further education (pursuing a degree in occupational therapy) who had not heard of the NDLP, I got the impression that she felt it would not be suitable for her as she was already following a chosen career path

To be honest I don't think it's something I would need to use for what I want to do, (pause) I know what path I'm taking and have my own contacts to help me get there (1)

But it was also acknowledged by this mother and among others that it could be of benefit to lone mothers

I can see how it would be valuable to mothers, I think that those that need help finding work or even knowing what is out there, it could make a big difference

I think that the NDLP sounds good as it gives you the chance to pursue what I would call proper jobs, rather than just floating from job to job, but having a plan... (3)

The mother that did have experience of being on the NDLP stated that she did not have prior knowledge of the NDLP and had found out about it through approaching the local Job Centre Plus about job vacancies, reflecting the previous concern regarding a lack of awareness of the programme among lone mothers

Once I was there they told me about the new deal, I was surprised I hadn't heard of it sooner. It sounded right for me at the time, I was considering going back into full time employment but needed some advice...(2)

One reason that she felt it was good for her was due to a belief that she didn't at the time possess enough up to date skills to do what she wanted to do in her career. In her case her personal advisor suggested she go on a local run course

As I wanted to get into office personnel work, but had very limited computer knowledge, my PA enrolled me in a local run course. I was really glad of the opportunity (2)

Personal Advisor.

The personal advisor is a central component of the NDLP programme, having one seemed to be a positive thing for the mother that was on the NDLP, she stated that having someone to go through everything, added a personable touch that made the experience easier

Having someone going over everything with you really helped, I can imagine it can be quite daunting on your own. She made everything a lot easier to understand as well (2)

I have had ongoing help from my PA, she's been really good throughout the whole process, I think it's vital that you have a good relationship with them and be as honest as you can (2)

One reason that mothers claimed had put them off going into full time work was the feelings of insecurity surrounding approaching the job centre, especially if they had been out of the employment market for a long period of time

I have been working part time for my uncle for the past few years, and do feel nervous about starting a new job. If I had someone there to go through everything with me, it would make it a lot easier I think (3)

Once you've been out of work for a long time, like I had, you do need that extra help and support. I wish had this help to be honest (4)

Therefore having a personal advisor seems to be appreciated by the mother that was on the NDLP and to have had a positive impact regarding her experience on the programme. The other lone mothers in the sample claimed to think it a beneficial thing, however, as they had no actual encounters with a personal advisor, what they were to encounter in practice may be different from how they perceive it to affect them.

Mothers not on the NDLP.

The other mothers I spoke to although had not made use of the NDLP, did however possess opinions regarding this policy, one mother had heard of it but for various reasons had not decided to go on it. That as she wasn't really sure what it was, this had discouraged her from pursuing it further

I have heard of it, yes, but I don't know anyone else on it and don't have that much knowledge of what happens, so haven't really thought about joining yet (3)

Another mother had not heard of the NDLP, but was working part time in an office locally, she was however considering going back into full time employment and showed interest in the NDLP.

I'm looking to go back into full time employment, so I think I will definitely consider it (4)

As she expressed interest in information on the NDLP, I provided her with a sheet of paper that had a list of useful contact details and web sites on (see appendix).

Mothers that I spoke to about the NDLP and its aims seemed to think that it would be a step in the right direction for ensuring employment for lone mothers such as themselves, while not all thought it was right for them, they did feel that on the whole, government was providing help to them through more opportunities in the labour market and schemes such as the NDLP was generally appreciated.

Employment.

All of the mothers I interviewed were currently working, either full or part time, one mother worked for a relative which she found to be quite flexible in terms of the hours and times she worked. Two of the mothers were involved in full time employment. One of these had had a series of part time jobs, but had made the step into full time a few years ago, resulting in participating in the NDLP

Since having my son I've managed to have a few part time jobs, but felt me and my son would get more out of me working full time (2)

Another mother had found a job gaining relevant work experience after completing a degree in occupational therapy; she was working full time and seemed to be satisfied with it, in terms of pay and the nature of the job claiming that it's flexible as they understand her situation

This is what I want to do, although I'm on a low rung of the ladder at the moment, as my experience increases, so will my pay (1)

It suits me as they know that I split from my partner and I have those responsibilities. They're more often than not ok with that (2)

Job flexibility is often cited as being important to aiding lone mothers in employment, mothers put it as an important factor as to whether they took employment or remained in a job

Although the pay isn't that good, it allows me to be flexible. If my child's not well or whatever, I know I can get time off to take them to the doctor (3)

One of the things that puts me off working full time and in a new job is not being able to take time off when needed (4)

Being in employment seemed to be beneficial to the mothers in terms of reducing their feelings of social isolation. A common theme was that being in employment meant that they could spend time meeting new people, which increased their feelings of confidence and esteem

I like the socialising aspect of work. I've managed to meet a new group of friends through it, which has been really good for me because when I broke up from my partner I didn't really know many people (1)

Working enables me to meet all sorts of new people, I don't feel half as lonely as I would if I didn't work (2)

I don't get much chance to socialise, so working for me is a way to see people during the week (4)

Finance.

The issue of poverty or financial hardship that the lone mothers have faced was quite a dominant theme that the mothers seemed to want to talk about. They wanted to make clear their financial situation, I wasn't expecting this due to issues of sensitivity, however it was welcomed. This is of use to the research as it shows how employment can affect the finances of lone mothers. Government has placed strong emphasis on the advantages of welfare to work, that it is vital in any detailed analysis to include the mothers' perspectives on this topic.

The mothers generally seemed to think that they were financially better off in employment, although it did depend on factors such as whether the work was part time or full time

One reason that I chose to do a degree was that it would mean at the end of it I would have a career, which is what I wanted, better money and a more fulfilling job (1)

Obviously, full time work pays better, which is why since Josh (not real name) has been old enough I have decided to do (2)

Working for my uncle means that I'm bringing in some money and it's convenient for me, which other jobs may not be at the moment (3)

I've worked in various part time jobs, like shop work and I can say that on the whole it is poorly paid, and not enjoyable work, but you have to sacrifice the money for the extra hours (4)

The mother on the NDLP stated that since finding employment through the NDLP, her financial situation has improved

The NDLP provided me with the opportunity to get a full time job which is what I'm interested in doing. It's better paid than the job I was doing before this, which was only part time anyway (2)

Employment was also seen as a way of achieving independence, the mothers stated that it meant having their own income and could make their own decisions about what to spend it on

I wanted to work so that I knew I could provide for my children, I feel good about this (2)

Working meant not having to rely on anyone to help me out, my independence is very important to me

Prompted by researcher – *who would you rely on?*

Like my ex, or my family, I feel too guilty to let them always help me out (1)

I didn't want to rely solely on benefits and handouts from my family all the time (4)

Discussion.

The NDLP Policy.

The findings from this research highlighted from speaking with the mothers have shown that overall they seem to appreciate the extra support in finding employment. The mother that had participated on the NDLP programme seemed to rate it highly, she showed satisfaction with the support her personal advisor gave her, stating that this is an important point of the programme. The other mothers were not on the NDLP, which although does affect the results in terms of assessing how effective it was at finding them employment and improving their financial position, it does show that there may be problems surrounding encouraging enough lone mothers to join. As Millar (2003, cited by DWP Dec 2003) has found to also be an issue and potential limitation of the programme, which may have implications upon the government reaching the target of getting 70% of lone parents in employment by 2010. However, all the mothers spoken to were currently in employment, which adds support to this projected target.

It was stated by the policy advisor that the NDLP has a higher take up rate than other new deal programmes, this also points towards the fact that the majority of mothers want to be in employment. Contrary to the social threat discourse used by political commentators such as Charles Murray, which paints a negative picture of lone mothers reinforcing the culture of welfare dependency, the main reason why the mothers did not work or only work full time, was due to concerns about deserting their mothering responsibilities. This carries resonance with Duncan & Edwards (1999) work around gendered moral rationalities, which shows that the decision to go into employment is inherently a moral one, rather than being solely based around economic cost/ benefit analyses. Although mothers did highlight the move into full time employment when able to was due to wanting to earn a higher income.

The literature claimed that there could be problems regarding the government reforms which seek to encourage a large proportion into the labour market. For instance, it has been claimed that it may have the implication of singling those mothers not in employment out as a social group and could lead to fragmentation of society. The findings don't seem to highlight this concern with the mothers or the policy advisor in the main, however one mother did express a concern that working may not be right for everyone and government should not lose sight of this.

Employment.

The mothers spoken to were either in full or part time employment, all but one expressed a desire to work full time; this was due to the increased income to be earned along with a feeling of wanting to pursue a career, something more worthwhile. Employment was viewed in a positive light by the mothers, as some stated upon separating or divorcing from their partner or husband, they saw it as a way of being able to meet new people. This is a frequently documented issue, particularly when leaving an abusive relationship and the women's social network can be quite isolated.

Earning their own income and not being financially dependent seemed to resonate with the mothers in the sample, it had been a primary reason the mothers mentioned with regards to their motivations for finding employment. The literature highlighted this issue, mothers often suffer the most on divorcing or separating from a partner (Kiernan *et al* 1998), employment helps to counter this. Therefore the market has to an extent a financial emancipating effect on the mothers, providing them with income and independence (Hobson 1997, cited in Kilkey, 2000), which they otherwise would not possess.

All the mothers had at some point worked in part time jobs, or currently still were. These jobs tend to be less well paid, reflected in the decision by many to move into full time employment. This finding reflects that which was stated in the literature, that many women are disadvantaged in the labour market as they feature more in these types of jobs than men do. Thus it could be said that lone mothers are thus doubly

disadvantaged, they face additional obstacles than other mothers such as childcare responsibilities, often compromising with part time work, that is poorer paid.

Finance.

The findings suggest that employment has a positive impact upon the financial situations of lone mothers. Working full time increased their income, although this tended to differ with regards to whether they were working full or part time and what type of job it was. Working full time produced the best increases in employment, one of the mothers that worked part time, did feel she and her child suffered financial hardship, this was because the office job she had was poorly paid and she felt reliant on benefit support. She had made the move into full time employment, her motivation being the need for an increased income.

Education seemed to be a positive move in the long term, improving her financial status once she had got a degree and had some experience in the area. It can be stated that she increased her human capital through pursuing further education, this has been one comment around the employment policies, it is stated that the best outcomes on the NDLP will be achieved when employment is combined with education or training, '*The most effective way to help lone parents into employment seems to be a mix of provision - help with job search, access to suitable education and training*' (Millar, cited by DWP 2003:3).

Conclusion & Future Recommendations.

The research presented here highlighted various points of interest in the area of lone motherhood, with regard to the recent New Labour policies, such as the NDLP on the employment experiences or opportunities of lone mothers. Government's target to have 70% of lone parents in employment by 2010 has been stated by some to be rather ambitious, it is a difficult task as 70% is a sizable majority of this social group, and there may be many interrelated factors that will influence their decision or opportunity to take employment. The findings from past research show that there may be problems around getting lone mothers onto the NDLP in the first place, as it is voluntary some mothers may not have heard of it or not fully understand. Because it works by showing the mothers how much better off they are likely to be in employment (which it is claimed they are due to government increases in the minimum wage for instance), it is only once they are involved that they are aware of it. This research also seemed to illustrate this point.

Employment of lone mothers is a complex area, in order to fully understand it, detailed analyses of their lives need to be researched into, in order to capture a sound understanding of what issues are salient to them and how their situation can be improved upon to make it easier for them to go into and remain in employment, as rates of job retention has been stated to be high in this social group. When on the NDLP,

literature shows that the majority of mothers gain a sustained job, which the mothers in the sample seemed to prefer, reflected in the active pursuit of those things which will ensure they have a 'career' rather than a series of jobs. Generalising on the experiences of the lone mothers in the sample, it seems that going back into the labour market can be a daunting task, and different in individual cases as lone mothers make a diverse social group. Therefore it is recommended that government acknowledges this diversity when designing future policies. For instance, it is stated that the NDLP needs to continue to work on the basis of each individual case, and aim to provide the best action plan and route into the job market for each individual lone mother. The research also highlighted implications around childcare, the mothers interviewed seemed to show a discouragement from using private, formal based care, in preference for that provided by the family. If it is to achieve the 70% target, it will need to continue to make childcare more accessible and affordable to mothers over the forthcoming years. It can also be generalised that the prime concern of lone mothers is with their children, sometimes it may not be right for them to work, reflecting a personal choice that is routed in moral rationalities rather than purely one of economic incentives.

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List of Useful Contacts and Websites for the NDLP

Child Benefit Enquiry Line

Tel 0845 302 1444

www.hmrc.gov.uk/childbenefit

Tax Credit Helpline

Tel 0845 300 3900

Textphone 0845300 3909

www.hmrc.gov.uk/taxcredits

Pre school Learning Alliance

The pre school learning alliance represents and supports 15,000 community pre schools. They can provide excellent local advice about childcare options

020 7833 0991. www.pre-school.org.uk

Jobcentre Plus/ Job seekers Direct

0845 606 0234

Textphone 0845 605 5255

7am- 11pm

7 days a week

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

Appendix

Topic Guide (given to all lone mothers)

All interviews were recorded for practical reasons and then transcribed shortly after taking place.

Background

Personal details – age

Family – dependents

Context under which became a lone mother (e.g. divorce, separation, widowed or never married/ partnered)

Schooling – educational background/ qualifications (more in depth later on)

NDLP

Any experience or knowledge of the NDLP?

What are experiences of it – was it successful in providing suitable employment, would you choose to use it again, would you recommend it to other lone parents/ mothers?

Do you agree with the government's drive to get more lone parents into employment in order to reduce poverty? General views towards the current governments attitude towards lone mothers

Employment/ NDLP

Employment had whilst being a lone mother, employment currently in

How they found that employment – through the use of the job centre plus, friends etc?

Decisions for taking employment

Experiences in employment, any problems encountered during finding employment or remaining in employment

Views on family friendly policies at work (flexi hours, child care facilities etc) – any experience of them?

Childcare

What types of childcare made use of whilst in employment?
experiences?

Are you satisfied with current provision? Any improvements?

Can government improve the current situation?

Education/ training

Any further education qualifications?

What were decisions for pursuing this?

Did they encounter any problems or obstacles to getting into further education and remaining in it?

Taken part in any training/ skills building courses?

Work/ Family Balance

Juggling work and family responsibilities?
How do counter these imbalances?

Close the interview – Thank her for her time and co operation
Repeat that all findings will be confidential, and anonymous. Give her any further information on the NDLP should she express a wish for it.

Appendix 2

Topic Guide (Given to the Policy Professional)

Background

Role/ job background
Duration working there

NDLP

Background to the policy

His role on it – what he was involved with, what he encountered during that time

Opinion of the aims and objectives of the NDLP – why was it launched

Opinions generally towards lone mothers in employment

Design and implementation of the policy – successes of the NDLP in terms of finding jobs – what types of jobs

Compared to other New Deals, how is this different? Does it have different success factors?

What are the potential problems or limitations around the NDLP?

How can these be countered?

Future direction for the policy – what now – extended to more lone mothers, move from voluntary to compulsory? What are the aims of these future plans? How will it affect lone mothers?

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