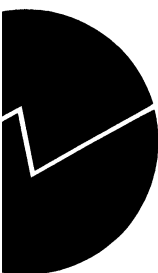


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**Single Parents in the
Norwegian Labour Market.
A changing Scene?**

Documents



1. Introduction¹

This paper presents a framework for a research project analysing single parents' employment patterns and economic adjustment in Norway during the last two-three decades². The purpose is to sketch a theoretical and empirical framework for the first stage of the research project. The discussion will be partly related to a just finished study of economic adjustment patterns among members of a «cohort» of Norwegian single parents, and will end up by presenting some preliminary empirical results, based on a limited part of the data sources which will be utilised in the project.

2. A framework for analysis

2.1. Low employment rate among Norwegian single mothers...

In Norway, as in many other Western European countries, we have witnessed a more or less steady rise in female employment during the last two-three decades. Since the beginning of the 1980's a striking feature of the changing Norwegian labour market has been an increased labour market participation among mothers, especially married and cohabiting³ mothers of small children. To-day almost three out of four married mothers of pre school children are employed. The rate corresponds to the over all employment rate of men, and exceeds the employment rate of all women by ten percentage points. Although so far there are great lacks in statistics and knowledge of the changing employment patterns of single mothers (and single fathers), there is reason to believe that the labour market participation has not developed in the same way among married and single mothers in Norway. Preliminary calculations based on The Norwegian labour force surveys roughly show that only one out of two single mothers of pre-school children are employed (1996).

Because rates and numbers very often are measured differently and often are based on different assumptions in various countries, one should be careful when comparing «secondary» statistics between countries. Still, rough comparisons indicate that the employment rate of Norwegian single mothers is relatively low both in a Nordic and a Western European perspective (Eurostat 1992, Lewis and Hobson 1997, Bradshaw et al 1996). Compared to the Norwegian labour market development, the rise of female employment in Sweden, for instance, started earlier (Skrede 1986), and, in contrast to Norway, included both married and single mothers during the last decades. The Swedish mothers' lead to the Norwegians has, however, been shortened in later years, as the unemployment rate has increased in Sweden and decreased in Norway during the mid nineties. The fact that unemployment has increased more among single mothers than among married mothers *and* fathers in Sweden, may have some interesting implications for the Norwegian discussion (which will be returned to later in this presentation).

2.2. ...due to generous benefits?

The Norwegian predominantly universal social welfare system has been subject to political debate during recent years. The result has been some welfare law changes, mainly transfer restrictions, of which restricting single parents' social security rights (from January 1998) is one of the most controversial changes. Through the last two decades, transfers to single parents within the Norwegian social security system have been viewed as generous compared to systems of other Nordic and Western countries, as very few conditions have been imposed on the recipients, and the spell of

¹ Paper presented at seminar on "Current European research on lone mothers", Gøteborg University 24-25 April 1998.

² The project will be carried out in collaboration with Marit Rønsen, Statistics Norway, and is financed by The Norwegian Research Council and Statistics Norway for the period 1998-2001.

³ Married persons also includes cohabiting persons in this presentation.

benefits has been fairly long. Consequently critics have argued that the generosity of social benefits has been a main cause of low labour market participation among Norwegian single mothers. No doubt the newly introduced restrictions have been pushed forward by politicians who assume a strong correlation between a generous and flexible system of social benefits and low labour market participation. Only a few voices have questioned the «incentive-» or the «economic man-» way of thinking in this field.

Compared to other groups with low employment in Norway, the labour market development of single parents⁴ has been little analysed. There are important exceptions however, for instance Rønsen and Strøm's analysis (1993) of single mothers' labour supply in 1989-1990. Other relevant studies in the field during later years are Terum's (1993) and Solli's (1996) analyses of representative data on transition to work among single parents' on social benefits, and my study of work and economic adjustment patterns over the life course among single parents of 1991 (Kjeldstad 1997 and 1998). There has also been done some important qualitative research in the field (Ryen 1991, Syltevik 1996)⁵. Still we know very little about the processes behind single parents' labour market participation and what kind of prospects and hindrances they face under changing labour market conditions. We also lack basic knowledge about changes in employment, unemployment, underemployment and working hours of single mothers and fathers over time, as compared to married mothers and fathers.

2.3. Human capital and life continuity

A recent life course analysis of the 1991 single parent «cohort» shows that there is a great variety of economic adjustments during the life cycle stage of single parenthood (Kjeldstad 1997 and 1998)⁶. The heterogeneous pattern holds true both when it comes to dependence vs. independence of welfare benefits *and* when it comes to stability vs. shifts in economic adjustment during the life cycle stage. Two out of three single parents of 1991 had received social security «transitional allowance»⁷ for some time during single parenthood, while three out of four had been employed for one month or more. 43 per cent had been consistently working, somewhat less than half of them had combined work and allowance for shorter or longer time. Half of the single parents had received transitional allowance during the entire spell, most of them combining with paid work for some time.

Even though transition to single parenthood involves experiences common to most people who enter this phase of life, the 1991 study shows that single parents, no more than other parents, constitute a homogenous group of people, and no more than other parents are characterised by a uniform way of life or a uniform pattern of life events. Above all, the analysis reveals a considerable variety of individual resources, experiences and conditions under which individuals (mothers and fathers) become more or less the sole care giver and economic provider of a child. One of the main conclusions from the study is that for most individuals, the transition to single parenthood does not lead to interruption of their main economic activity. Most students continue studying, most employed and occupationally active go on working; usually the same hours as before. Life after transition to

⁴ In this presentation the notions single parents and single mothers are often used synonymously. This may be justified as nine out of ten single parents are single mothers. At a later stage of the research project however, differences in labour market position and economic adjustment among single mothers and single fathers will be analysed.

⁵ A further discussion of the relevance and implications of several of these earlier analyses in relation to the questions and problems of our project, will have to wait until a later stage of the project.

⁶ The analysis is restricted to the single parent period when youngest child is aged 0-10 (see also note 7)

⁷ Transitional allowance is the most important of several transfers to Norwegian single parents. Until the restrictions were introduced in January 1998, single mothers and fathers with work income lower than NOK ca. 180.000 were entitled to (full or reduced) transitional allowance until youngest child had finished third grade of school (In Norway at the time usually at the age of 9-10). Full transitional allowance corresponded to old age pension minimum level, NOK ca. 66.000.

single parenthood is therefore to a large extent characterised by continuity in relation to earlier life. Economic adjustment during single parenthood seems largely to depend on what human resources and human capital the person brings with him or her into the new life cycle stage, and by the person's labour market position at the time of transition.

At the same time the study of the 1991 «cohort» revealed significant gender differences. Such differences being of course numeric, as 90 percent of single parents are women, and as women constitute 98 percent of the transitional allowance recipients. But the study also showed that men who go through the life cycle stage of single parenting, enter the stage under very different conditions, and from a very different life situation than women. They are predominantly older, have older children, have higher education, more work experience etc. than single mothers. In contrast to single mothers, who resemble most women, single fathers is a strongly selected group of men. This fact entails in turn significant differences between the sexes in economic adjustment during the stage.

2.4. Single mothers treated differently than married mothers in the labour market?

Relating to the main conclusions from the study of the 1991 «cohort», one may apply a human capital perspective on explaining the lower employment level of single mothers as compared to married mothers. The presumptions would be that single mothers have weaker labour market resources than married mothers, and therefore are less apt to seek or find employment. On the one hand they may be considered less attractive for employers and be more vulnerable to unemployment, and on the other hand they may, because of prospects of relatively low wages, have weaker incentives to seek work instead of alternative economic support (social benefits). The analysis of the 1991 single parent «cohort» reveals, however, only few significant differences in human capital at «comparable stages of the life cycle»⁸ between single and married parents (read: mothers). Thus the fact that individual human resources are important in explaining economic adjustment during single parenthood of the 1991 Norwegian «cohort», may not necessarily mean that the same type of explanation is relevant in explaining the general employment or unemployment development of single mothers as compared to married mothers. Even though human resources- or human capital may be important to explain *within* group variation, such factors may *not* be so important in explaining *between* group variations. A crucial question is whether single mothers as a group, regardless of individual resources or characteristics are treated differently than married mothers in the labour market. Or turned around, whether single mothers respond differently to changing labour market conditions than do married mothers.

At the same time, low employment level of various population groups may well be caused by *different* factors or processes. Staat and Wagenhals' (1996) analysis of OECD data shows for example that education has greater significance for the employment rate of single parents than of other groups. Differences in human capital may also affect labour market participation differently from one country to another. The relationship between employment rate and group- or individual characteristics, may depend on national and local labour market- and welfare characteristics. For instance Wolfe and Hill (1995) found a strong effect of health on American single mothers' labour market participation, while Kjeldstad (1998) found no significant effect of health from Norwegian data. The different results from the US and Norway *may* be related to structural differences between the two countries. It is reasonable to believe that the Norwegian labour market, supplemented by a fairly generous welfare system, is generally more tolerant towards employees with health problems and periods of reduced achievement, than the American labour market.

⁸ There were some differences in health and education; single mothers somewhat worse off than other groups.

2.5. Economic cycles and employment of single mothers

Despite both national-, *within group*- and *between group* differences in labour market participation, single mothers are generally regarded as a vulnerable group in relation to other population groups in the labour market. This is partly due to strict time schedules and limited labour market flexibility related to the sole responsibility for care and support of small children. Employers may also take such circumstances into consideration in the engagement process. From time to time Norwegian newspapers report of single mothers unjustly neglected at job engagements and career promotions. Thus it seems likely that single mothers, more than married mothers and other groups, would be sensitive to economic cycles and labour market fluctuations, i.e. they would be particularly vulnerable to unemployment in times of economic slowdowns, and subject to difficulties finding employment in times of low labour demand. High employment rate and low unemployment rate of single mothers, then, would primarily be a phenomenon related to economic upswing.

Swedish experiences may support such a hypothesis. Gustavsson, Tasiran and Nyman (1996) show that while labour market participation rates among mothers of young children, both married and single, were close to the rates of fathers in 1991, the decreasing employment and increasing unemployment during the following four years, which reflect a period of general economic slowdown, was much more dramatic for single mothers than for married mothers and fathers.

In our forthcoming analysis we want to investigate the relationship between changing economic cycles and the employment of single mothers and fathers as compared to married parents. In the following short empirical presentation, data is presented for single *parents*. The discussion will, however, mainly be concerned about the changing employment situation of single *mothers*.

There are several hypotheses which could be investigated further, or tested, through such an analysis. If we expect to find that single mothers are more sensitive to economic fluctuations and changing demand for labour than other comparable groups, this may be caused by lower «stocks» of human capital and heavier time restrictions because of extra care responsibilities among single mothers than among comparable groups, either reflecting real differences, or reflecting employers' assumptions of such differences (as mentioned earlier in this paper). Either way it may mean that single mothers will tend to lose out in the competition for jobs in economic recession. In this connection a relevant question would be if single mothers are in majority in job arrangements⁹ or occupations and sectors that are particularly sensitive to economic fluctuations. The question is relevant among other things because sex differences in unemployment rate in Norway during the last decades has been closely related to a strongly gender segregated labour market (see later in this paper).

Summing up, to understand processes behind single mothers' (and single fathers') changing position in the labour market and in society, analyses should incorporate both an individual or actor's perspective *and* a structural perspective. Thus labour market characteristics and changing economic cycles become important. This is particularly true for cross national comparisons, *and* for analyses of historical changes of the social and economic position of single parents.

2.6. Changing welfare regulations and employment

A structural perspective should not, however, be limited to viewing single parents as subjects to changing economic conditions and changing labour market demand. Another important structural element lies in the institutional rules and regulations under which single parents seek, or choose not to seek, employment. Different kinds of welfare state regulations may render different limitations and freedom of choice.

⁹ Herunder temporary employment, some types of part time jobs etc.

Several comparative, cross national studies of single parents' social position, have an institutional point of departure. National variations in the employment rate and in income level are often related to different «welfare regimes»¹⁰ (Hobson 1994, Borchhorst 1994, Lewis and Hobson 1997). The studies, however, generally reveal that there is no one-to-one relation, where generous welfare benefits always go together with low employment (Lewis 1997). Quite contrary, cross national institutional studies rather encourage to *questioning* the assumption that generous benefits increase the disincentives to seek employment among single parents. In our research such questions will be focused in a historical perspective, i.e. over a period of some 20-25 years. Changing labour market adjustment among single parents will be related to changing regulations for transfers and benefits in the Norwegian welfare state. Thus, in addition to an economic cycle perspective, focusing on changes in the labour market *demand* structure, we also want to discuss how changing welfare policies cause new limits and scopes for individual choice, which again may lead to changing *supply of labour* among single parents.

What are the effects of changing social benefit regulations on the employment of single parents? As the Norwegian benefit system (until January 1998) has imposed no condition on the single parent to seek work, one might make the hypothesis, contrary to the economic cycle related hypothesis, that single parents until now have been less sensitive to changing labour demand than other comparable groups. The reason would be that a generous benefit system may have a selection effect, leaving only the more «robust» single parents, the ones with «the suitable» human capital, to seek employment. The general employment rate, however, would be relatively low, as a good proportion of the single parents would prefer benefits to paid work. Restricting the generosity of the benefits, then, would reduce the effects caused by selection, while increasing the benefits, would increase the effects. As the welfare system may serve as a buffer to changing labour market conditions of single parents, the employment- and unemployment effects will not necessarily be complementary. A decreasing employment rate will not necessarily be reflected in an increasing unemployment rate, because to be registered as unemployed, one has to be actively seeking employment, which is has not been the case of most Norwegian single parents receiving transitional allowance.

3. Empirical samples from the 1980's and 1990's

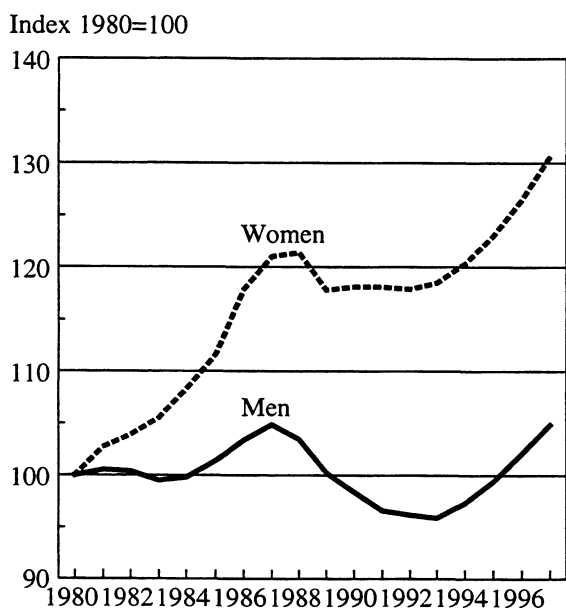
3.1. Economic cycles and changing unemployment rates

Compared to most other European countries Norway has had an overall low unemployment level through the last 25 years (Rødseth 1997). However, like in most other European countries, there have been distinct fluctuations. This is particularly true for the years since 1980, where the unemployment rate has ranged from 1,7 in 1980 to 3,4 in 1983, and from 2,0 in 1986 to 6,0 in 1993 (Statistics Norway 1994 and 1997). In 1996 the unemployment rate of Norwegian women and men was 4,9 and 4,8 percent, as compared to 9,0 and 7,2 of Danish, 7,5 and 8,5 of Swedish and 18,6 and 21,1 of Finnish women and men (Nordic Statistical Yearbook 1997).

Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the cycles of Norwegian economy and changing labour demand since 1980. Although the employment rate has increased much stronger for women than for men during the period, the fluctuations are distinct for both sexes. The latter is true also for unemployment. Nevertheless changing economic cycles have affected men's labour market position more than women's through the 1990's. This is to a great deal due to a strongly segregated labour market, where women are predominantly employed in public sector and sheltered industries, while men to a larger degree are employed in industries subject to national and international competition.

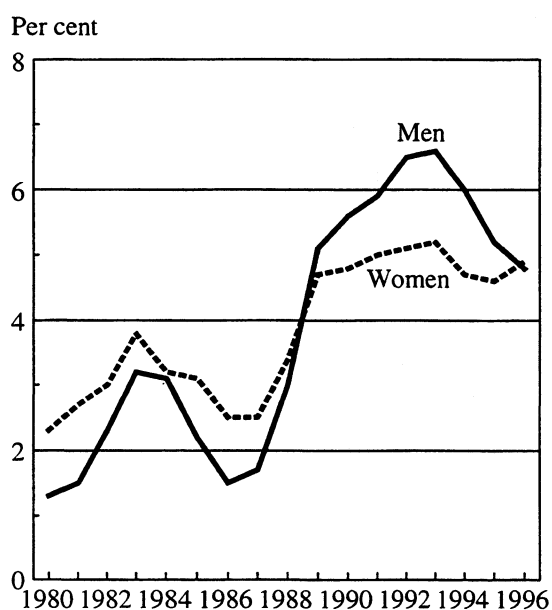
¹⁰ The literature in this field relates to a large extent to Gøsta Esping Andersens pioneering work in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* from 1990.

Figure 1. Employed persons aged 16-74. 1980-1997. 1980=100



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

Figure 2. Unemployed as per cent of the labour force. Men and women aged 16-74. 1980-1996



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

Around the mid eighties and the mid nineties there were distinct upswing periods in the Norwegian labour market, while the years in between were characterised by decreasing employment and increasing unemployment. As the figures 1 and 2 show, the years around 1983 and 1993 were the peak periods of unemployment in Norway, while the peak employment periods so far, according to the latest statistics, were around 1987 and 1997.

3.2. 1990: New regulations reducing «welfare trap»

Since the beginning of the 1980's until to-day (1998) there have been three major law amendments redefining who has the right to transitional allowance, and under which conditions. Before 1981 benefits to divorced and separated «family supporters» were administered by the local social offices, while benefits to unmarried mothers were part of the National social security scheme. Since 1981 the two benefits are both incorporated in the social security scheme; the most important change being that single fathers, whether they are unmarried or separated/divorced, got the same rights as single mothers to transitional allowance (Hatland 1984).

Transitional allowance has always been income tested (see note 6). In January 1990 the rules for income testing were modified to reduce the «welfare trap» that came into being when single parents wanted to combine transitional allowance with part time work. The new rules granted a lower rate of benefit deduction, thus encouraging part time employment.

The third significant change of rules was introduced in January 1998, involving a «package of» changes that may affect the labour market participation of single parents. The package is composed of several practical initiatives to help activate single parents, and also economic incentives to seek employment, thereunder a wider income interval with no benefit deduction. Another change, that may, however, turn out to have more dramatic effects, is a significant shortening of the allowance

spell, to maximum three years¹¹, and, when the youngest child is older than three, allowance may be received only if the mother or father seeks employment or registers as unemployed. This change should be characterised as enforcing, rather than encouraging, single parents to seek employment, and to many single mothers, at least in times of economic slowdown, this may mean increased registered unemployment, and more important, increased *actual* unemployment.

The first effects of the 1998 amendment cannot be registered until a year or two from now. Therefore, and due to data limitations at this stage of the project, only two of the three law and regulation changes will be discussed here, and mainly the change of 1990, opening up for more flexible combinations of paid employment and social benefits.

3.3. Single mothers' employment: Sensitive to economic fluctuations

Awaiting yearly data from the 1970's until to-day, on employment, unemployment, working hours, occupational adjustment, leave of absence etc. for groups of single and married mothers and fathers¹², some preliminary figures may serve as illustrations to some of the questions put forward in this paper.

As shown in figure 3, the employment rate of single parents (mainly single mothers), compared to women in somewhat similar age, have been low throughout the entire period from 1980 until 1995. Worth mentioning is however that the employment rate of single parents were at the highest, and higher than the rate of women 25-44 years, in 1980, the year before single fathers got the same right to transitional allowance as single mothers. This must be further investigated as it is doubtful, or at least surprising, if the new gained rights of unmarried single fathers should explain the decreasing employment level of single parents¹³.

It is evident, however, that the employment rate of single mothers to a large degree corresponds to the cycles of the Norwegian economy, and more so than is the case of the comparable group of women. While the employment rate of women increased through most of the 1980's, the 1983 economic slowdown seems to have had a dramatic effect on the employment rate of single mothers. Also the cycles of the 1990's seem to have had a more significant effect on the employment rate of single mothers than is the case for other women.

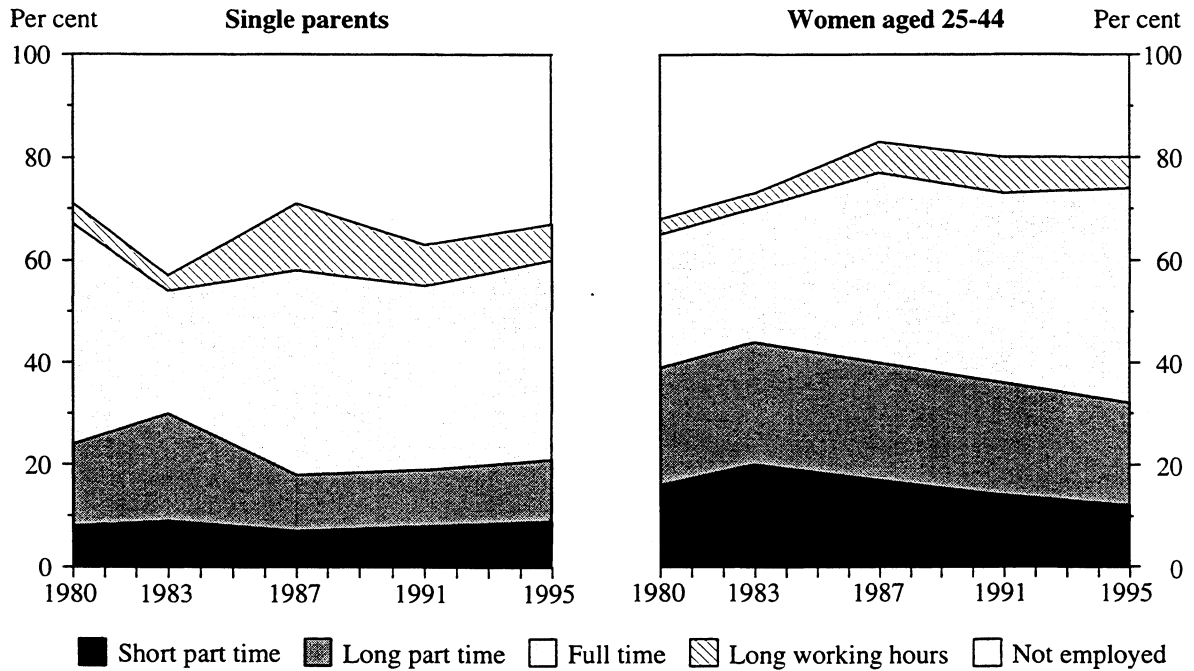
To a certain degree working hours also seem to be more in line with economic fluctuations among single mothers than among women in general. Striking is the level of part time work, which, throughout the entire period, is higher among women in general than among single mothers. But while part time is a decreasing labour market adjustment since the beginning of the 1980's among Norwegian women as a whole, part time rate was at its lowest among single mothers in the unemployment bottom year of 1987, and has increased somewhat since then. The increase of long working hours (longer than regular full time work) among single mothers in times of labour market upswing, underline the overall impression that Norwegian single mothers, more than Norwegian women as a group, have an «either/or- adjustment» to the labour market: While Norwegian women through the last decades have been part time workers to a large degree, the major picture of Norwegian single mothers is, either full time or more, *inside*, or *totally outside* the labour market.

¹¹ There are some exceptions to this rule, which will not be commented upon here.

¹² The planned analysis will be mainly based on Labour Force Survey data connected to register data on individuals' family- and household composition. Figures 3 and 4 are based on Level of Living Survey data. Notice that Level of Living Surveys are only carried out every three or four years, and that the figures serve only as rough illustrations

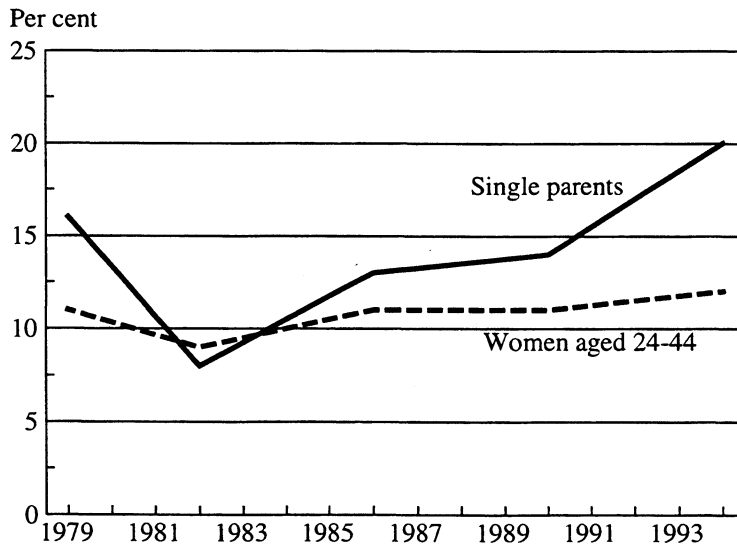
¹³ This doubt is related to the assumption that single fathers constituted a very small proportion of single parents at the time, and to the fact that Norwegian single fathers had a much higher employment rate than single mothers in 1991 (Dahl 1993).

Figure 3. Not employed and employed by working hours. Per cent of all single parents¹ and women aged 25-44. 1980-1995



¹ Not married and not cohabiting women and men living with children aged 0-19
 Source: Surveys of Level of Living, Statistics Norway

Figure 4. Unemployment experience during the year. Single parents and women aged 25-44. 1979-1994. Per cent



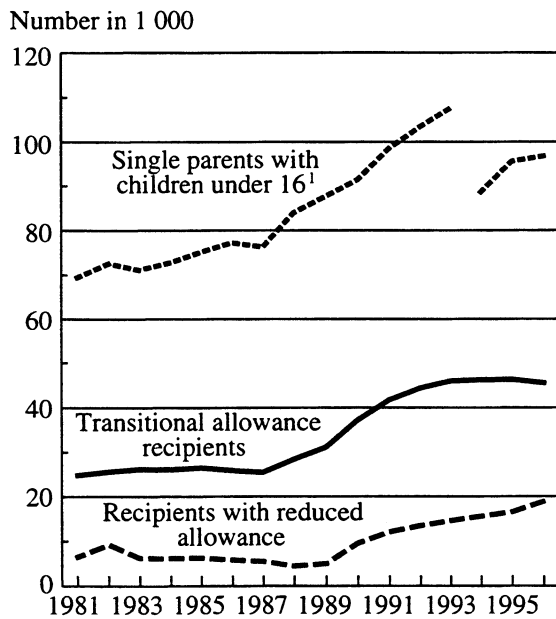
Source: Surveys of Level of Living, Statistics Norway

The higher unemployment rate of single mothers as compared to all women (aged 25-44) (figure 4)¹⁴, supports the general economic cycle sensitivity hypothesis. A closer analysis of the processes behind single mothers' «hyper sensitivity» to labour market cycles, relating to the sketched theoretical framework described earlier in this paper, will be done at a later stage of the project. The most general questions to be analysed are whether the causes are to be found mainly on the «supply side», or mainly on the «demand side», of the labour market.

3.4. Increased part time work - a response to regulation changes

A slight increase of part time work among single mothers through the 1990's, a period when part time has been a declining phenomenon among women as a group (figure 3), may partly be a consequence of the 1990 changes of the transitional allowance regulations. This is further illustrated by the development of single mothers and fathers receiving reduced (income tested) transitional allowance during the period 1981- 1996. Figure 5 shows that there has been an increase of the number of single parents receiving transitional allowance. However the increase corresponds closely to the total increase of single parents throughout the period, and the increased number of allowance recipients is mainly constituted by single parents working part time, receiving reduced allowance as a supplement.

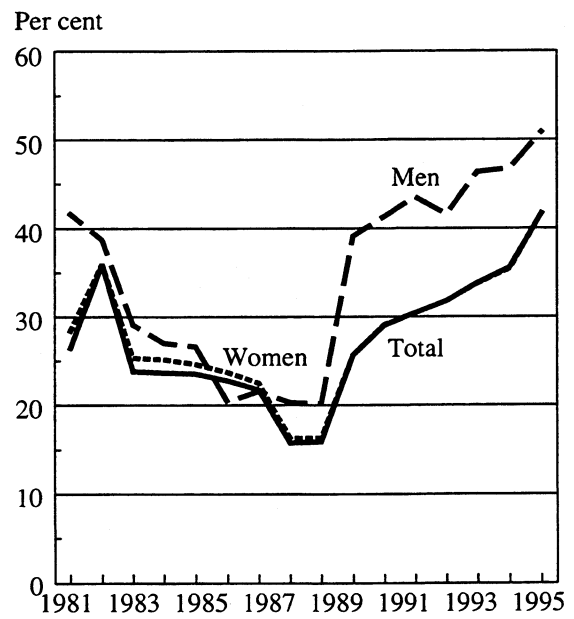
Figure 5. Number of single parents with children under 16 and number of single parents receiving transitional allowance. 1981-1996



¹ Time series break in 1994 as cohabiting single parents are excluded

Source: The National Insurance Administration

Figure 6. Proportion of transitional allowance recipients with reduced allowance. 1981-1996. Per cent



Source: The National Insurance Administration

¹⁴ Note that the notion *unemployment* used here, differs from the most commonly used concept of unemployment. While the latter usually reflects the proportion unemployed at a certain date, figure 4 shows the proportion of the actual groups that has experienced unemployment some time during the preceding year.

The general picture of the 1990's is a strong increase of single parents, followed by a much weaker increase of transitional allowance recipients. Thus the proportion receiving transitional allowance has decreased in later years. This decrease is partly paralleled by an increase of the employment rate, partly by an increase of the unemployment rate. Investigating which of these components is the stronger, will, however, have to be postponed until our planned data base of yearly labour force survey- and population register data is compiled and ready for analysis. A general impression so far, however, is that single parents, and, as a matter of fact, particularly single fathers, very quickly grasped the improved chances to combine transitional allowance and paid work. Thus the regulation changes of 1990 seem to have had a great effect on the income composition among many single parents. The forthcoming analysis will hopefully reveal if it also reflects changes in labour market adjustment.

4. Conclusion

Of the various economic adjustments discussed in this paper, the adjustment of total dependency on benefits and no paid work seems to be the only «losing out». This development seems to be caused by two parallel processes in the Norwegian labour market since the beginning of the 1990's. One is economic upswing and increased demand for labour. The other seems to be an increased work orientation among single mothers, indicated by statistics on employed and unemployed single parents. This is also consistent with the figures showing the increasing number of «combined» allowance recipients through the 1990's, which *may* reflect an increased number of recipients taking part time work. However, at this stage of the analysis the latter is no clear indicator of changing work orientation, as the increased number of combined allowance recipients may also be a mere reflection of the lower rate of benefit deduction among part time workers

Supplied by employment and unemployment «Level of Living statistics» from 1980 and forward, however, the figures show that single parents are, more than other groups, sensitive to economic slowdown and recession. Therefore, in future economic slowdowns, Norwegian single mothers, just like Swedish single mothers during the first half of the 1990's, may experience a major labour market set back.

One main aim of the 1998 amendments of social security law has been to increase the labour market participation of single mothers. Statistics presented in this paper, however, show that including most single mothers in the labour market, presupposes a high level of labour demand. The effect of amending the rules so as to encourage or force single mothers to seek work, therefore, will most likely to a great degree depend on macro economic conditions. In addition, as the increased activity rate of single mothers the later years shows, single mothers already, as a matter of fact, are «ahead of» the legislators. Thus it may seem reasonable to question the necessity of the amendment.

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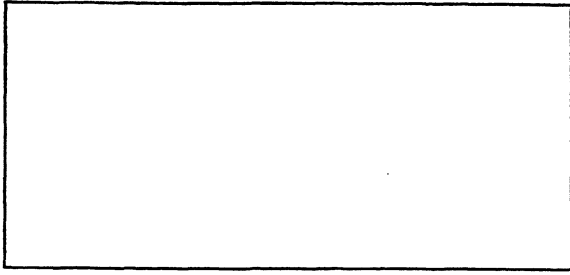
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