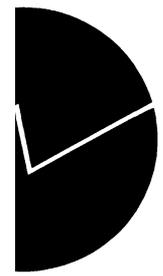


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**Lone Parents and the "Work
Line": Changing Welfare
Schemes and Changing Labour
Market**

Documents



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Lone Parents and the "Work Line": Changing Welfare Schemes and Changing Labour Market

Abstract:

This paper questions the assumption of a direct causal relationship between welfare regulations and the labour market participation of lone parents. It concludes that labour market changes among Norwegian lone parents appear to be more sensitive to economic labour market fluctuations than to changes of welfare regulations. The analysis is based on time series data from the Norwegian labour force surveys during the last 19 years.

The paper is a revision of a paper published as Documents 98/9 (Statistics Norway). As the earlier paper was mainly a presentation of a framework for future analysis, and was based on very preliminary data, the present paper represents a further analytical step. Albeit based on principally the same framework, the present analysis using more recent and relevant data sources, entails some new and somewhat varied conclusions.

Keywords: Lone parents, welfare policies, employment, unemployment.

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1. Introduction

Do welfare restrictions bring about increased labour market participation among lone parents? As a rule, work line policies in many western countries during later years are based on the assumption of a direct causal relation between welfare regulations and labour market participation. This paper questions this assumption. It concludes that labour market changes among Norwegian lone parents appear to be more sensitive to economic labour market fluctuations than to changes of welfare regulations. Heavy welfare restrictions in times of economic recession may however, most likely increase the labour market problems of lone parents and cause unemployment instead of increased employment.

The analysis is based on time series data from the Norwegian labour force surveys during the last 19 years. The discussion is mainly concerned about the changing employment of lone mothers as compared to married and cohabiting mothers¹. However, as the labour force survey samples are large enough to provide relatively reliable statistics for small population groups such as lone fathers, rough comparisons are also made between lone and married mothers and fathers.

2. Employment of Norwegian lone mothers

2.1 Low employment rate...

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 married² mothers with small children. Today 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. The labour market participation among lone mothers has however not developed in the same way.

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 statistics between countries. Still, rough comparisons indicate that the employment rate of Norwegian lone 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) has included both married and lone mothers during the last decades. The Swedish mothers' lead over 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 lone mothers than among married mothers *and* fathers in Sweden, may have some interesting implications for the Norwegian discussion .

¹ With children under the age of 16

² Married persons also include cohabiting persons in this presentation

2.2 ...due to generous benefits?

The Norwegian welfare system has until recently supported the caring role of the lone parent, unconditioned of labour market participation. Being the only care person in the family was seen as a potential hindrance towards paid work, and thus implied the right to allowance. While the welfare systems of other Nordic countries have primarily been aiming at encouraging and supporting labour market participation among lone parents, Norwegian lone parents have to a larger extent been given an option as to whether or not to take paid work, and whether to take full- or part-time employment. Thus transfers to lone parents within the Norwegian social security system have traditionally been viewed as generous compared to systems of other Nordic and Western countries. Very few conditions have been imposed on the recipients, and the spell of benefits (transitional allowance) 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 lone mothers. No doubt recent 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.

2.3 ...or low human capital ?

A recent life course analysis of the 1991 lone parent «cohort» (Kjeldstad 1997 and 1998)³ reveals that economic adjustment during lone parenthood is largely dependent on what human resources and human capital the person brings with him or her into the new life cycle stage. A decisive factor is her or his labour market position at the time of transition. The study also shows that men who go through lone parenthood 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 lone mothers. In contrast to lone mothers, who, when entering lone parenthood, resemble most women of their age, lone fathers is a somewhat selected group of men. Norwegian lone mothers do however have a slightly lower educational level on the average than married mothers, while lone fathers have a higher educational level than married fathers (Dahl 1993).

Lower education among lone mothers may imply that they are less apt to seek or find employment or are more often employed in unsteady jobs than other parents. On the one hand they may thus be more vulnerable to unemployment. On the other hand they may, because of prospects of relatively low wages, have weaker incentives to seek work instead of alternative economic support by transitional allowance. Among lone fathers the same human capital logic would however imply high employment and low unemployment.

3. Economic cycles and employment of lone parents

A crucial question is whether lone mothers (and lone fathers) are treated differently than married parents in the labour market regardless of individual resources and characteristics. Or turned around; whether lone parents respond differently to changing labour market demand than do married parents. Either way, the logic would partly rest upon the fact that the sole

³ The analysis is restricted to the lone parent period when youngest child is aged 0-10

responsibility for care and support of small children implies strict time schedules and limited labour market flexibility. Heavy time restrictions may however not only be a problem to lone mothers. Apart from the fact that the children in lone father families on the average are older than in lone mother families, time restrictions should also to some degree be a lone father problem. There are indications that employers sometimes take such circumstances into consideration in the engagement process, however more so towards lone mothers than towards lone fathers.⁴ From time to time Norwegian newspapers report of lone mothers who have been unjustly neglected at job engagements and career promotions. Such phenomenons are, however, most probably related to times of low labour demand. This means that lone mothers will tend to lose out in the competition for jobs in economic recession.

Swedish experiences supports such a hypothesis. Gustavsson, Tasiran and Nyman (1996) show that while labour market participation rates among mothers of young children, both married and lone, were close to the rates of fathers in 1991, the decreasing employment and increasing unemployment during the following four years of economic slowdown was much more dramatic for lone mothers than for married mothers and fathers. High employment rate and low unemployment rate of lone mothers, then, would primarily be a phenomenon related to economic upswing. Thus the question of labour market characteristics and changing economic cycles should be included in analyses of lone mothers' (and lone fathers') position in the labour market and in society. This is particularly true for analyses of historical changes of the social and economic position of lone parents.

4. Changing welfare regulations and employment

A structural perspective should not, however, be limited to viewing lone 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 lone parents seek, or choose not to seek, employment. Different kinds of welfare state regulations may render different limitations and freedom of choice.

Several comparative, cross national studies of lone 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»⁵ (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 lone parents. In this paper these questions will be further discussed, focussing on the Norwegian labour market during the last two decades. Changing labour market adjustment among lone 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, the paper also discusses how changing welfare policies cause

⁴ Kennelly (1999) describes this phenomenon as "That single-mother element", showing that many American employers use a stereotype single mother image to explain why they think black women are poor workers, and thus often discriminate against black women in the job engagement process

⁵ 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.

new limits and scopes for individual choice, which again may lead to changing *supply of labour* among lone parents.

What are the effects of changing social benefit regulations on the employment of lone parents? As the Norwegian benefit system (until January 1998) has imposed no condition on the lone parent to seek work, one might make the hypothesis, contrary to the economic cycle related hypothesis, that lone 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» lone 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 lone parents would prefer benefits to paid work. Restricting the generosity of the benefits, then, would reduce the effects caused by selection, and thus make lone parents as a group more vulnerable to changing labour market demand. As a generous welfare system may serve as a buffer to changing labour market conditions of lone parents, the employment- and unemployment effects of changing regulations will not necessarily be complementary. An increasing employment rate will not necessarily be reflected in a decreasing unemployment rate. Regulation restrictions may lead to increased employment among those with high human capital *and* increased unemployment among those with low human capital.

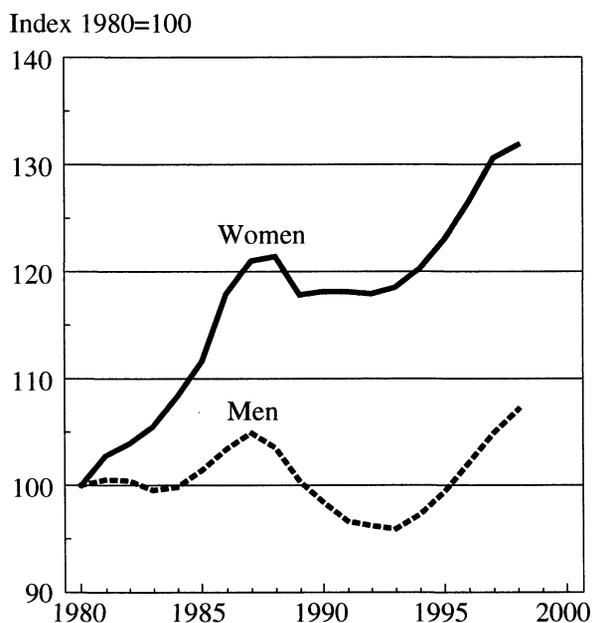
5. Economic cycles and changing unemployment rates in Norway 1980-1998

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 1998 the unemployment rate of Norwegian women and men was 3 percent, as compared to 8 of Danish, 6 and 7 of Swedish and 11 and 12 of Finnish women and men (20-64 (66) years, Nordic Council of Ministers 1999).

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.

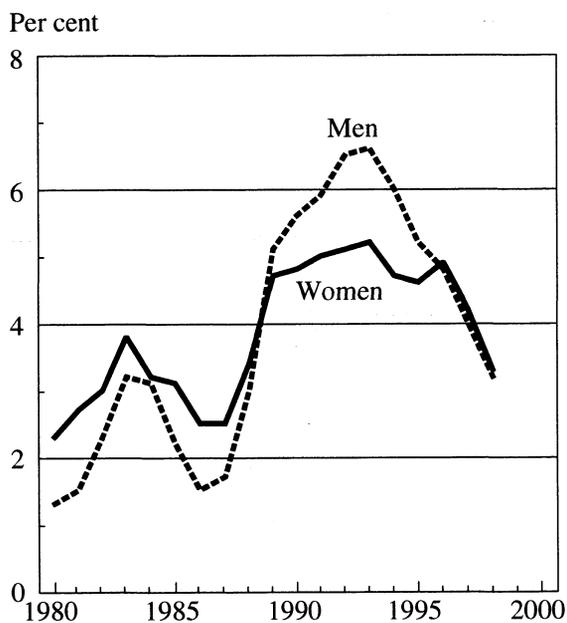
Around the mid eighties and the mid/late nineties there were distinct upswing periods in the Norwegian labour market, while the years in between were characterised by decreasing employment and increasing unemployment. As figures 1 and 2 show, the years around 1983 and 1993 were the peak periods of unemployment in Norway, while the peak employment periods so far, according to the latest statistics, were around 1986/1987 and 1998.

Figure 1. Employed women and men aged 16-74. 1980-1998. 1980=100



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

Figure 2. Unemployed as per cent of the labour force. Women and men aged 16-74. 1980-1998



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

6. New benefit regulations 1980-1999

Since the beginning of the 1980's until to-day (1999) there have been four major law amendments redefining who has the right to lone parent transitional allowance within the Norwegian national social security scheme, and under which conditions. From 1972 benefits to divorced and separated mothers were administered by the local social offices, while benefits to unmarried mothers were part of the national social security scheme since late 1960s. In 1981 also the benefits to separated and divorced mothers were incorporated in the social security scheme. The most important change was however that lone fathers, whether unmarried or separated/divorced, got the same rights as lone mothers to transitional allowance (Hatland 1984).

Transitional allowance has always been income tested. In January 1990 the rules for income testing were modified to reduce the «welfare trap» that came into effect when lone 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 lone parents.⁶ The new package is composed of several practical initiatives to help activate lone parents, and also economic

⁶ Transitional allowance is the most important of several transfers to Norwegian lone parents. Until the 1998 amendment, lone mothers and fathers with work income lower than NOK ca. 180.000 were entitled to (full or reduced) transitional allowance until the youngest child had finished third grade of school (in Norway at the time, usually at the age 9-10). The rights were unconditional on educational or employment seeking activities.

incentives to seek employment, including a wider income interval with no benefit deduction. According to the new regulations, only parents of children under the age of eight may receive transitional allowance. In addition there has been a significant shortening of the eligibility period, to maximum three years⁷. When the youngest child is older than three, allowance may be received only if the mother or father seeks employment or registers as unemployed. These changes should be characterised as enforcing, rather than encouraging, lone parents to seek employment, and to many lone mothers, at least in times of economic slowdown, this may mean increased unemployment. The full effects of the 1998 amendment cannot be fully registered until a year or two from now. However, it should be plausible to expect some early indications in 1998 employment data.

The fourth amendment, adopted in Parliament in December 1998, restricts the transitional allowance rights even further, as cohabiting parents became ineligible for benefit⁸. This amendment came into force in July 1999, and will not be commented upon here.

7. Employment of lone parents: More sensitive to labour market changes than to welfare regulation changes

Figure 3 illustrates the generally high but slightly declining employment rate of Norwegian married fathers and the rising employment rate of Norwegian married mothers during the last two decades, corresponding to the general development for women and men (figure 1). At the same time it reveals an almost steadily lower employment rate among lone parents as compared to married parents. This applies both to lone mothers and lone fathers⁹. This "gender neutral picture" is inconsistent with a human capital explanation often used to explain low employment among Norwegian lone mothers. If low employment among lone mothers is mainly caused by low "stocks" of human capital, one should expect high employment among lone fathers, as they as a group are privileged rather than socially deprived. Consequently, instead of leaning to different selection hypotheses, explanations related to lone parenthood *as such*, should be investigated.

Roughly, as discussed earlier in this paper, such explanations may seek causes either at the "supply side" or at the "demand side" of the labour market. Supply side explanations tend to emphasise individual choices between work and benefits, depending on the generosity of welfare benefits and how easily they are obtained. If the employment of lone parents was mainly a reflection of welfare benefit levels- and regulations however, we should expect to find employment and unemployment changes following regulation changes. To be sure, the inclusion of lone fathers in the benefit system in 1981, which for the first time gave lone fathers the choice between work and benefits at a minimum pension level, was followed by a temporary drop of their employment level (figure 3). 1983 was, however the year of the lowest general employment level and the top unemployment year of the 1980's. An almost perfectly reverse development in employment and unemployment level among lone fathers therefore (figure 3 and 4), indicates that the employment drop is caused by labour market

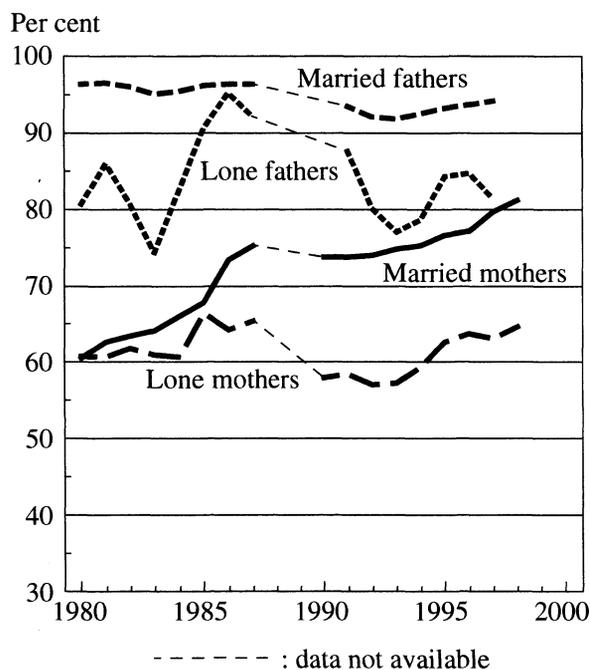
⁷ There are some exceptions to this rule, which will not be commented upon here.

⁸ Cohabiting parents with common child(ren) have always been excluded

⁹ The figures for lone and married parents are not significantly different (at a five percent level) at all registration points. This is particularly the case for fathers and mainly due to small samples of lone fathers. Systematically lower employment level and higher unemployment level among lone as compared to married parents however, support the general conclusions drawn from the figures

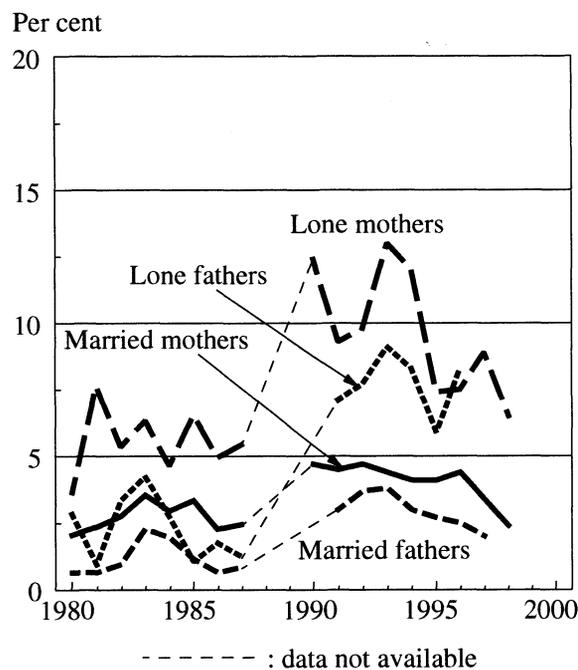
problems rather than by new prospects of being provided for outside the labour market. As a matter of fact, the employment level of lone fathers during the 18 years they have been included in the lone parent benefit system, is as a whole no lower than it was before (i.e. in 1980, figure 3).

Figure 3. Employed married and lone mothers and fathers with children under 16 years, per cent of all persons in each group. 1980-1998¹



¹ 1990 and 1998: Preliminary figures
Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

Figure 4. Unemployed married and lone mothers and fathers with children under 16 years. Per cent of persons in the labour force in each group. 1980-1998¹



¹ 1990 and 1998: Preliminary figures
Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Norway

To lone mothers the 1981 amendment did not involve new options between work and benefits, as unmarried mothers had obtained the right to transitional allowance already in the 1960s and divorced and separated mothers had obtained equivalent rights in the early 1970s (see section 6 in this paper). As such the stable employment level of lone mothers during the early 1980's is no surprise. Census data from 1970 and 1980 do however indicate that there has been a drop in the employment rate of lone mothers during the 1970s (Kjeldstad and Rønsen forthcoming), i.e. during a decade of extended benefit rights. This development was quite contrary to the development among married mothers, whose employment rate increased significantly, and the different development among lone and married mothers during the 1970s has been a core argument for restricting lone parent benefits. The fact that employment decreased among all lone mothers, not only among those with benefit rights (ibid.), underlines however that one should be careful maintaining a direct causal relation between changing regulations and labour market participation among lone parents.

The falling behind of the employment of lone mothers as compared to married mothers has been going on for at least thirty years. The increasing employment gap is however not primarily a result of lone mothers dropping out, but more of the strong increase in the employment rate of married mothers. This is especially the case during the mid 1980s, where the employment increased very strongly among married mothers and levelled out among lone mothers. When benefit regulations opened up to a more flexible system for combining work and benefits in 1990, the employment gap between married and lone mothers was at its widest since early 1970s, when all lone mothers obtained the right to transitional allowance (or equivalent benefits).

Although this amendment was not mainly motivated by the general low employment level of lone parents, but rather aimed at reducing the poverty trap imbedded in the former rules, the expectations were that the amendment would cause an employment rise among lone parents. Or more precisely; that the labour market supply of lone parents would increase (Rønsen and Strøm 1991). As the amendment was assumed to increase the incentives to seek employment (particularly part time employment), both the employment and unemployment rates of lone parents were expected to increase. Rather surprisingly Rønsen and Strøm's later empirical analysis of changing labour supply conclude that the effects one year after the regulation amendment were somewhat ambiguous. They found positive effects on the labour supply by mothers with former low income and negative effects on the supply by high income mothers (Rønsen and Strøm 1993). Their analysis did however include only lone mothers who were employed at the time of regulation change.

Figure 3 indicates no positive effect on the employment rate of the 1990 amendment. Quite contrary, the falling employment rate of lone parents appears as a more or less steady trend from the peak years of the Norwegian labour market in 1986/87 until the bottom year 1993.¹⁰ The generally higher unemployment level of lone parents during the 1990s as compared to the 1980s *may* however, indicate that the 1990 amendment has caused an increased tendency among lone parents to, unsuccessfully, seek employment. A corresponding increased general unemployment level among women and men and all parents in the early and mid 1990s as compared to most of the 1980s, indicates however that the development among lone parents is not unique in this matter. The stably low employment rate of lone mothers during the first half of the 1990s suggests rather, no employment effects of changing rules.

Unlike the 1990 regulation changes, the 1998 changes were grounded on the need for budgetary cuts. In Norway, like many other western countries, the "work line" was introduced to reduce welfare expenditures. Various new forms of pressure have been put on traditionally low employed groups to seek employment. One of the main target groups of Norwegian work line policies of the late 1990s was lone parents. Also unlike the 1990 amendment, which increased the options of lone parents, the 1998 amendment restricted these options heavily, by reducing the eligibility period of transitional allowance from 10 to 3 years (see note 6). As indicated earlier, the full employment effects of the 1998 amendment are not likely to appear until at least a couple of years from now. Nevertheless, preliminary 1998 figures of the average employment and unemployment levels during the first year of new regulations,¹¹ may give some indication of possible short time effects.

¹⁰ Possible short term fluctuations which might "hide" behind lacking annual observations cannot alter this general picture.

¹¹ Due to technical data difficulties 1990-and 1998-figures are preliminary and shown only for mothers (figure 3 and 4)

The slight employment increase among lone mothers in 1998 is no stronger than the increase among married mothers, which should indicate no particular employment effect among lone mothers so far. Nor can a particular unemployment effect be seen. Like that of married mothers (and fathers) the unemployment rate of lone mothers has been reduced significantly since 1993. And rather than continuing the temporary unemployment increase of 1996 and 1997, 1998 figures indicate a continued downward trend also for lone mothers. Thus, neither an anticipated particular upswing of the employment rate of lone mothers, nor a dreaded upswing of the unemployment rate, can so far be revealed after the 1998 amendment.

Summing up, the anticipated labour market consequences of changing benefit regulations cannot, or can only exceptionally, be seen from large scale cross section employment and unemployment statistics. A much more striking picture is revealed however, when the same statistics are related to the economic fluctuations of the Norwegian labour market during the last decades. Bearing in mind the recession periods around 1983 and 1993 and the upswings of the 1986/87 and late 1990s, we find a strong correlation, and a far more significant one, for both lone mothers and lone fathers than for married parents. This result is somewhat surprising in the Norwegian case, as Norway's traditionally generous benefit system should presumably represent an economic buffer to lone parents in times of low labour demand. The distinct fluctuations among lone fathers are particularly surprising. In addition to an economic buffer, their relatively high "stock" of human capital should rather imply a certain robustness towards changing labour markets.

8. Conclusion

This analysis covers a historical period of changing labour demand in the Norwegian labour market *and* of changing welfare regulations towards lone parents. One problem of a mainly descriptive analysis like this one is of course, to separate the effects of the one type of change from the effects of the other type of change. For example possible effects of the expanding rights of the 1981 and 1990 amendments may have been swamped or neutralised by general labour market trends, as both amendments were followed by periods of low labour demand and increasing unemployment. Similarly, the reason why the restrictions of 1998 show no employment effects so far, may be the general upswing in the Norwegian economy. Still the analysis shows that increasing welfare generosity does not necessarily lead to withdrawal from the labour market, even in periods of economic recession. The periods following extending welfare rights in Norway have rather been characterised by lone mothers and fathers actively, but unsuccessfully, seeking work.

The present analysis gives no answer as to what may be the labour market consequences of *restricted* welfare regulations towards lone parents in periods of economic recession. Related to the Swedish experiences of increasing unemployment in a period of work line policies and labour market recession, the Norwegian experiences suggest however, that labour market exclusion may be a major lone parent problem when the present Norwegian labour market upswing levels out or turns around.

To conclude, both Norwegian and Swedish experiences reveal important limitations imbedded in the current welfare policies towards lone parents. If high employment during lone parenthood continues to be viewed as a main political goal also in the years to come, policies should include a much broader scope of policy measures. A general conclusion of

this analysis should be then, that such policies should also focus on labour market structures, such as job organisation, job arrangements and the attitudes of employers towards lone parents. Most of all however, policies should be aiming at combating unemployment in general.

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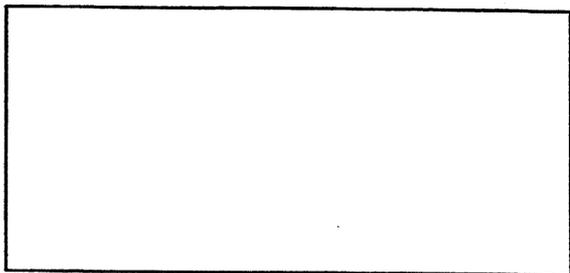
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