

---

# “Doing the Job as a Parent”: Parenting Alone, Work, and Family Policy in Ireland

Journal of Family Issues


33(1) 29–51

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X11420957

<http://jfi.sagepub.com>

 SAGE

Michelle Millar<sup>1</sup>, Liam Coen<sup>1</sup>, Ciara Bradley<sup>1</sup>,  
and Henrike Rau<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Recent studies of family life in Ireland have focused on changes in “traditional” family structures, including the increase in one-parent families. This article illustrates the impact dominant conceptions in Irish society that privilege the family based on marriage have on one-parent family policy. The authors focus on two key areas of social interaction associated with family life—parenthood and (un)paid work—to identify both congruences and tensions between social policy and the needs of one-parent families. The article draws on interview and survey data collected in Galway in 2007 to show how existing welfare policies create some opportunities for those parenting alone while at the same time perpetuating inequalities within the gendered family context and across multiple generations.

## Keywords

family, parenting alone, female work force, unpaid work, social policy, Ireland

Recent developments in Irish social policy regarding those parenting alone have been shaped by the notion of “helping individuals to help themselves”

---

<sup>1</sup>National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway, Republic of Ireland

## Corresponding Author:

Michelle Millar, School of Political Science and Sociology/Child and Family Research Centre,  
National University of Ireland, Galway, University Road, Galway, Republic of Ireland  
Email: [michell.millar@nuigalway.ie](mailto:michell.millar@nuigalway.ie)

through their (re)integration into the labor force. This policy of minimal state intervention coincides with the persistence of a paternalistic vision of Irish family life based on marriage, nuclear family structures, and the gendered distribution of (un)paid work. This approach to welfare provision becomes particularly problematic in the context of one-parent families. Coakley (2005) observes that recent Irish welfare discourse “problematizes lone mothers as welfare dependent and has framed labour market activation as a solution” (p. 8). This article sets out to challenge the assumption that “activation” can be the sole solution to problems of economic hardship and social exclusion experienced by these parents and their children.

Using data from a study undertaken in Galway in 2007 as well as existing statistics, this article shows that such policy proposals are likely to perpetuate traditional family structures based on the gendered division of (domestic) labor and that many of those parenting alone find it difficult to reconcile conflicting demands regarding paid work and family life. More important, it is often other family members, in particular grandmothers, who help address these tensions between work, care, and welfare by taking responsibility for housework and child care. Although these multigenerational arrangements temporarily ease the burden of inadequate child care provision and welfare policies, they are likely to both increase and spread the risk of poverty and social exclusion in the long term. Older female family members in particular are likely to bear the brunt of current “activation” proposals by providing key services (domestic chores, child care) for little or no pay. In addition, parents without immediate family and kinship support networks such as many of those with migration background may become even more vulnerable and at risk of poverty.

The remainder of this article is divided into five principal sections. After a brief discussion of the centrality of the family in Irish society and the development of Irish family policy over time, and methodology of the study will be outlined. Subsequently, we will provide an in-depth analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to show the challenges of reconciling work and care in the lives of one-parent families, followed by a discussion of the results and some conclusions.

### *The Centrality of the Family in Irish Society*

Debates on the role of the family in society have always been at the heart of sociological inquiry in Ireland. Indeed, it has been argued that “an understanding of the family is basic to a sociological understanding” (Share, Tovey, & Corcoran, 2007, p. 254). Prominent national and international

studies of family life—past and present—have highlighted the complexity of family relationships and their social, cultural, and economic dimensions, albeit from different theoretical standpoints, using diverse methodological approaches (Allan, 1999; Arensberg & Kimball, 1940/2001; Finch & Mason, 1993; Pfenning & Bahle, 2000). In relation to Ireland, O'Connor (1998) recognizes the role of the family as “an important symbol of collective identity, unity and security” (p. 89). Indeed, Byrne (2003) argues that in Ireland,

[T]he story of the family is one of the “great stories” inextricably bound up with the construction of national identity . . . in familist societies, such as Ireland, womanhood has been historically attained and recognised through heterosexual attachment, marriage and reproduction. (p. 443)

This link between family and national identity is also enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, which identifies the nuclear family as the basic unit in society, awards a special position to the family based on marriage, and guarantees its protection. In addition, the constitution prescribes a particular role for women within the home:

[T]hat by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved . . . the State shall, therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Bunreacht na hÉireann 2003 [1937]: Article 41.2)

Hence, although the Irish state has adopted a minimalist approach to providing supports and services for families, in reality “it does actually intervene directly in ‘private’ family life by prescribing what a family should look like” (Nicholls, 2006, p. 525). This constitutional reaffirmation of the male breadwinner model has remained in situ and has only recently been challenged with increases in female participation in the labor force (see below).

The historical influence of the Church on Irish family life and social policy is well documented (Inglis, 1980; McLaughlin, 1993, 2001; Millar, 2003). The dominant concern of family policy until the 1990s was “how to assist families with the costs of children and also to provide income support to mothers who had recently given birth . . . to support the family founded on marriage” (Daly & Clavero, 2000, p. 2). According to Scannell (1988), this reflected the State’s patriarchal approach and its support for privacy to the

**Table 1.** Types of Family Unit in Ireland 1996, 2002, and 2006

Family Type	1996	2002	2006
Married couple with children	491,567 (61%)	508,035 (55%)	516,404 (49%)
Married couple without children	154,854 (19%)	184,950 (20%)	225,773 (21%)
Cohabiting couple with children	12,658 (1.6%)	29,709 (3.2%)	43,982 (4.2%)
Cohabiting couple without children	18,640 (2.3%)	47,907 (5.2%)	77,781 (7.4%)
Lone mother with children	108,282 (13%)	130,364 (14%)	162,551 (15%)
Lone father with children	20,834 (2.6%)	23,499 (2.5%)	26,689 (2.5%)
Total	806,835	924,464	1,053,180

Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland (n.d.) census data for 1996, 2002, and 2006.

family while also serving to reinforce a vision of the role of women in Irish society as full-time wives and mothers, having a preference for “home duties” and “natural duties” as a mother.

The establishment of the Commission on the Family in the late 1990s was the first real attempt by the Irish state to initiate a joined-up approach to family policy (Fahey, 2006). However, the Commission’s report (Government of Ireland, 1998) recommended that the state retain the special status awarded to marriage to strengthen the position of this institution in Irish society amid declining marriage and birth rates and an increase in births outside marriage. At a time when family life in Ireland diversified, family policy remained firmly wedded to a view which “equates the strength of the family with the strength of marriage and advocates that not only is marriage beneficial for children’s welfare but the erosion of marriage carries a price for both individuals and society” (Rush, 2006, p. 143).

### *Family Policy in Ireland*

The nuclear family of married spouses with children is still the overwhelming type of unit in Ireland, and thus statistically the norm (see Table 1). In the 1990s, the growing number of Irish women engaged in paid work contributed significantly to economic growth and the so-called “Celtic Tiger” boom. Whereas in 1971 only 7.5% of married women were in paid employment, this had risen to 48.8% in 2004, with the proportion of all women in employment

standing at 56% (Rush, 2006). This rise is partly attributable to the abolition of the marriage bar in 1973 that ended the practice of forcing women in the public sector to resign on marriage (O'Connor, 1998). Simultaneously, the proportion of dual-earner households grew from 35% in 1993 to 49% in 2000 (McGinnity & Russell, 2007). This increase in female labor market participation has shifted normative family life, as married Irish women are now less likely to leave paid employment.

Irish family policy, however, has failed to keep pace. In fact, increases in female employment occurred *despite* the lack of state support, such as child care services, and the “dual burden” carried by Irish women regarding housework and caring (McGinnity & Russell, 2007). According to Cournède (2006),

Many of the young [*Irish*] mothers who have been able to work do because they can rely on free or low cost help from older women, friends or relatives who are not working. The supply of such helpers may dry up as today's young female cohorts grow older. (p. 7)

For years the assumption that underpinned welfare payments to those parenting alone was that recipients were not connected to the labor market (McCashin, 2004, p. 181), and as a result provided little incentive to do so. This reflected the dominance of the male breadwinner model in the Irish - and indeed many other European Countries' - social policy paradigm (Lewis, J, 2006) However, an earnings disregard introduced in 1994 as part of a pro-employment strategy incentivized paid employment and coincided with the setting up of numerous schemes, including National Training & Employment Authority (FAS), Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, Community Employment, Jobs Initiative, and Job Start. Unsurprisingly, the Community Employment scheme which included child care provision proved particularly successful in connecting recipients with employment opportunities ((NESF, 2001. Lone Parents. Dublin: Stationery Office). The current One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) system continues to permit recipients to engage with the labor market should they wish to.

The dual concerns of poverty rates among one-parent families—33% of whom live in consistent poverty compared with 7% of all families (Central Statistics Office Ireland [CSO], 2007)—and civil service disquiet about the amount of exchequer funds being spent on the payment (Millar et al., 2007) have prompted the drafting of more stringent, compulsory activation proposals for OPFP recipients (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006). The proposals posit the replacement of the OPFP with a parental allowance until

the youngest child reaches 7 years, at which time the parent will take up employment, education, or training. If implemented, these proposals will place those parenting alone on an employability continuum. One important qualification in the proposals is the redefinition of employment to 19.5 hours per week. This reflects some compromise in the policy between the role of carer and worker (Murphy & Millar, 2007).

## **Method**

The One Parent Family Study intended to shed light on the situation of parents and their children in Galway City and County and deployed a three-pronged methodological approach consisting of (a) a large-scale survey to recipients of the OPFP, (b) semistructured interviews with parents from the survey cohort, and (c) qualitative interviews with policy makers and service providers. Here, we will focus on the results of the One Parent Family Questionnaire Survey (henceforth the survey) and the qualitative interviews. The interviews with policy makers are covered elsewhere (Millar & Coen, 2008; Millar et al., 2007).

An initial draft of the survey questionnaire was based on a set of questions developed by Collins, Gray, Purdon, and McGee (2006) in the United Kingdom. This set was then extended and "localized," including linguistic changes to reflect local use of language. Additional items covering issues of accessibility, transport, and geographical location further broadened the scope of the survey. A preliminary draft of the questionnaire was submitted to the commissioning group for further modifications and feedback. A small pilot survey ( $n = 12$ ) was used to test the comprehensibility of the survey and identify any ambiguous questions. The questionnaire was subsequently sent to 3,144 recipients of the OPFP in Galway city and county. A total of 676 parents (22%) returned the completed questionnaire, including 10 fathers (1.5%). Although this response rate limits the generalizability of the findings somewhat, we argue that trends in the data are broadly reflective of one-parent family life in Galway.

Following the survey, we conducted qualitative interviews with 60 parents in urban (30) and rural (30) locations. Volunteers were selected from the pool of parents ( $n = 235$ ) who returned the survey and completed an entry form indicating their willingness to participate in subsequent interviews. Other selection criteria included age, gender, employment status, ethnicity, and age and number of children. Interviewees were contacted by telephone to arrange the interviews and address any ethical concerns (e.g., anonymity).

**Table 2.** “Top Five” Issues Affecting Respondent’s Ability to Stay in Current Job

Issue	Mean Score <sup>a</sup>
Not sure whether better off financially	1.95
Stress combining work and family life	2.05
Unforeseen extra spending	2.08
Lack of suitable, affordable child care	2.09
Not enough time spent with children	2.10

a. Item C7 used a 3-point rating scale, 1 = *big issue*, 2 = *small issue*, and 3 = *not an issue*, that is, the lower the score, the bigger the issue.

## Results

Accounts by those parenting alone in Galway city and county highlight their difficulties in reconciling parental obligations with attempts to take up paid employment, education, or training outside the family home. Both qualitative and survey data reveal the central role played by family members (and in some cases also friends) in supporting the parents and their children. Informal child care arrangements and other economic and social support afforded by family members often represent an all-important “lifeline” that allows parents to return to work, education, or training, thereby reducing their risk of poverty and social exclusion. However, the One Parent Family Study data also reveal that these family ties can be precarious, and in some cases problematic for some or all family members involved.

### *Managing the “Second Shift”: Work and Leisure Patterns of Parents and Their Families*

Respondents who were in paid employment at the time of the study were asked to identify potential difficulties that may affect their ability to stay in the current job. Question C7 consisted of an 18-item battery that covered a range of personal, family-related, and financial issues as well as concerns regarding work–life balance. The “top five” issues all revolved around balancing work and family life and managing financial pressure (Table 2).

The survey asked respondents to rate how particular issues affect their ability to participate in paid employment. Table 3 lists the “top five barriers” identified by those parenting alone in Galway City and County

These figures reveal the tensions between parental responsibilities, financial constraints, including fear of giving up welfare support and the

**Table 3.** “Top Five” Barriers to Paid Employment

Barriers	Mean	Mean (City)	Mean (County)
1. Being able to take time off at a short notice	1.56	1.67	1.43
2. Lack of suitable/affordable child care	1.62	1.65	1.59
3. Lack of suitable jobs	1.81	2.09	1.49*
4. Reluctance to give up OPFP	1.81	1.81	1.82
5. Not enough time with children	1.83	1.84	1.83

Note: OPFP = One Parent Family Payment. Item B9 deployed a 3-point rating scale, with 1 = *big issue*, 2 = *small issue*, and 3 = *not an issue*, that is, the lower the score, the bigger the issue. \* $p \leq .05$ .

affordability of child care, and the need for suitable work. This is also reflected in the qualitative interviews:

I want to get back into, you know, working full-time and that and not be on single parents allowance. I'd love to see the day that I could just ring them up and say "There you go, thank you very much, but that's it for me!" I really, really would and I know in my heart and soul in the next year I will be working full-time. (Fionnuala)

Parents who were already in paid employment at the time of the survey were asked to list any factors that made it possible for them to take up a job. Their answers included child care (e.g., affordable crèche or babysitter), support from family (e.g., grandparents looking after children), work-related factors (e.g., flexi-time), and financial reasons (e.g., pressure due to unemployment of other family members, Back to Work Allowance). They were also asked to identify their sources of parenting support. Two main groups—respondents' own family (32%) and the child(ren)'s school (19%)—played a central role in the provision of child care for those who had taken up paid work outside the home. Interestingly, some parents also seem to have waited for their child(ren) to reach a certain age before (re)entering the labor force, with 15% of all answers referring to children being old enough to look after themselves.

Many of those parenting alone find themselves in a situation similar to that of working couples but without the immediate support of a spouse or partner. This was borne out in the qualitative data; respondents spoke in great detail



about the perceived and experienced impact of work on their role as a parent. Some of those who had been in paid employment noted how stressed and exhausted they felt and how this affected their relationship with their child(ren). Providing children with what they saw as structure and stability was a key priority for these parents. Being at home when the children return from school to supervise homework, cook dinner, and ensure that teenagers in particular are not out on the street was seen as crucial. Some parents mentioned the organizational and logistical skills required to get to work and to ensure that the children are cared for. This is likely to affect their quality of life and feeling rushed was very much part of some respondents' daily experience:

It's not so bad like it's just organization more than anything else, trying to make sure that if I'm working in the evening that the dinner is ready for them when they come in from school. It's just organisation, who has the baby and where's the baby going you know it does get a bit hectic sometimes especially if I'm working an evening and then a morning and then an evening. It does get a bit hectic but it's just trying to organize it that's all. (Shonagh)

As a result of stress some parents found themselves being quite agitated and "snappy" in the evenings. This often led to feelings of guilt, concerns about neglecting the children, and conflicting emotions about working to secure a better livelihood for them and the children, yet leaving them being too tired in the evening to play or do fun things:

If I have a very bad day at work and I'm stressed and I tend to take it out at home on everyone around me and I don't want to do that . . . so that's the way with working you know I feel like I'm neglecting her and even though I know I'm working for her, I feel so bad for leaving her, I feel really guilty. (Lisa)

In relation to spending time with their children, some parents spoke of how their older children voiced their unhappiness that the parent was not available, and younger children were described as being clingy and upset when they were dropped off at child care. For some, the negative impacts of work on family life clearly outweighed the benefits of having extra money:

You know if there's no parenting there's no structure: when I was working myself I left the kids and I'll never forget it, it was terrible.

They'd come home cross from school and they had to make their own dinner and my daughter felt she wasn't cared for and I'd come home cross because I'd be hungry and tired. You'd be better off having very, very, very little money and just stay sitting under them and minding them and having dinner ready no matter what it was. (Kelly)

The age of the children is a key factor affecting parents' ability to take up paid employment. Many respondents with children of preschool age who were not working at the time of the study stated that once their children are in school, they will look for part-time employment as they will not have to pay for child care. Some of those with children in school were actively looking for part-time employment as they felt they would be able to balance work and employment. Others in part-time employment stated that they hope to take up full-time hours when their children go to secondary school. Yet many of the parents with children in secondary school found that full-time employment was not an option as their children needed them to be at home in the evenings both for nurturing and stability:

Until the kids go to school there's not a lot I can do, I'd love to go back to work, I'm hoping that childcare costs will come down it's just crazy in Galway . . . I just hope when they start school it'll get easier or there's some way you could get around it. (Brigid)

The data also identified additional factors that compound existing disadvantages for parents looking for paid employment. These include lack of suitable part-time work, transport-related barriers, in particular in rural areas, and experiences of discrimination that disproportionately affect non-Irish parents in Galway. On the whole, interviewees agreed that part-time work provides the best of both worlds, namely paid employment and the benefits of social contacts outside the home and being able to be with the children after school.

### *Family Networks and Child Care*

As stated above, female participation in the labor force has increased significantly since the 1990s, however, child care services in Ireland remain underdeveloped and expensive. As is evident from the results, family in general and female family members, in particular, are often the primary source of parenting support. Most notably, the parent's own mother tends to play a crucial role by providing child care and other forms of assistance that may or may not involve payment. Many parents reported that they not only benefit from but also sometimes depend on multigenerational family

**Table 4.** Percentage Informal and Formal Sources of Support in Parenting

Type of Support	(Very) Little Support (%)	A Lot of/Some Support (%)	Not Applicable (%)
<b>Informal</b>			
Child(ren)'s other parent	43	27	30
Child(ren)'s other grandparent	40	20	40
Own parents	19	62	18
Older children	7	16	77
Other close relatives	33	46	21
Friends	34	56	9
Neighbors	50	23	26
<b>Formal</b>			
Child minder	10	21	69
Counselor	8	8	84
Employer	15	17	69
Others in the workplace	15	13	72

networks to cover both child care and housework. The interview data suggest that gendered time use patterns persist across generations, with female relatives sharing the responsibility for child care and chores. The survey asked respondents to rate the level of support in parenting they feel they are getting from both informal (own parents, ex-partners and former in-laws, friends, neighbors) and formal (child minders, counselors, employer, colleagues) sources.

Table 4 shows that those parenting alone receive vital support from family members, in particular their own parents (43% in the “a lot of support” category compared with 19% in “some support” category). Friends are another important source of support, though they tend to offer “some support” (34%) rather than “a lot of support” (22%). Excerpts from the qualitative interviews also highlight the key role of grandmothers regarding child care:

So I'm paying my mother a small bit so it's not as much as the crèche but it's brilliant [ . . . ] I love him being with her because it's family, I suppose. So he's happy to be with her and he gets to go home to his own house so he gets to play with his toys. (Cathy)

If I didn't have my mother I wouldn't be able to do this course [ . . . ] I couldn't pay someone to do what she is going to do for me. I don't know how women in my situation manage without a mother. (Hannah)

**Table 5.** Formal and Informal Sources of Child Care

Source of Child Care (Multiple Answers Permitted)	Total (%)
Respondent's parents	22
School	19.1
Children old enough to take care of themselves	15.1
Other close relatives	10.1
Child minder	8.9
Close friend	6.4
Other	5.9
Child(ren)'s other parent	4.7
Crèche	4.2
Preschool/Montessori	3.5

This contrasts with the child(ren)'s other parent, former in-laws, neighbors, professionals, employers, and colleagues in work who score high in the categories "(very) little support" and "does not apply." For example, interview material dealing with the scope and quality of support given by the child(ren)'s other parent reveals complex arrangements that can at times create tensions in the family:

He doesn't see her as much as I'd like him to see her, maybe it's a bit unfair but I see him as a fair weather father, he's around when the times are good and I feel like I am the only one parenting. He'd be around about once a month but I'm the bad cop, it's always good times with daddy, it's Mommy that's the bad one, you know. (Gillian)

More important, this quote illustrates the centrality of parenthood for many participants which can conflict with (outside) demands to engage in paid work, such as recent policy proposals involving "activation":

For interviewees who were working or had worked since parenting alone, informal child care was the predominant form of child care, with the maternal grandmother being the most preferred and prevalent child minder. This is confirmed by the significant number of survey respondents in paid employment who listed their own parents (22%) and close relatives (10%) as principal sources of child care on most working days (see Table 5).

We can also see from the survey data that schools play a crucial role in terms of child care provision, though this tends to be an unintended side effect rather than a planned outcome of deliberate policy.

Overall, it would appear that the preference for the maternal grandmother minding the children arises from two factors. First, the low or no-cost aspect of informal child care compares favorably with expensive formal child care. Second, parents tend to trust family, and in particular the maternal grandmother to provide quality care:

If it wasn't for my mother looking after the kids there's nobody else would look after three kids for two and a half days for €60 a week! If I could give her more I would and then I come home from work and they say "Nanny shouted at me" or whatever and I say "You must have been doing something" cause I know my mother and I know she's looking after them the same way I would look after them, they get away with nothing. (Maura)

The ways in which parents and their families negotiate responsibilities, view mutual obligations, and establish trust relationships and reciprocity play a very significant role in this context. Some interviewees felt that they may perhaps be overburdening their family members, in particular their own parents who had already reared their own family. Role conflicts can also emerge on occasion, with some parents expressing fears that their children would be confused by different sets of rules: "It is hard to work when you have a child, I'm relying on them (child's grandparents) to bring her up as well, and because she sees her father, she has my rules, their rules and his rules" (Michelle). However, for many these concerns were deemed a small price to pay for the reassurance respondents felt about going out to work and leaving their children with the parents with whom they believed they were safe and loved:

You see, my parents look after her, if I didn't have my parents looking after her I just would not be able to work because childcare is just too expensive. . . . I don't pay them unless I happen to have a lot of cash they don't want any money. (Michelle)

Very few of the parents interviewed had used formal child care. It is notable, however, that those who were in education or training or had been since parenting alone were more likely to have used formal child care because state supports made this more affordable. In contrast, only two of the interviewees who were or had been in employment had used a crèche, citing preferences for informal child care as well as concerns about the (perceived) costs. Again, the cost of child care appeared to be a major stumbling block regarding paid employment, at least for some interviewees:

In my last job I was a chef and I was only taking home €380 even as head chef and if I was to pay a crèche for two children then that is €250, so I can't afford to go back to work. (Faye)

Not all respondents were able to rely on family for parenting and emotional support due to family not living nearby, family members having passed away, or family disapproving of one-parenthood. In some cases, parents without family relied on friends instead: "I've made a very very good friend . . . she's the type now who'd do absolutely anything for you and she's a great friend to have . . . I think everybody needs a friend like that" (Debbie). However, many respondents without immediate family and social support networks felt much more exposed to the challenges of parenting alone:

I literally have no friends because how could I? I'm with the kids all the time. . . . I would have no money to socialize or anything. Not with them. . . . And you just kind of feel stuck and without the support of your family. (Kate)

Overall, the data suggest that many parents, their families, and sometimes friends develop strategies to distribute work in the home more evenly and that this allows some of them to either start or return to work. On the other hand, those without support appear to be much more vulnerable to the risks of parenting alone, including lack of emotional support and financial pressure.

## Discussion

The recent government proposals to change the support structures for those parenting alone occur at a time when "the working mother" is not only becoming the norm in Irish society but also the necessity economically. By 2000, half of all couples in Ireland were dual earners (Share et al., 2007), and societal attitudes surrounding those parenting alone and their employment status began to change as a result. However, this normative stance clearly fails to take into account the nuances of one-parent family life that emerged from the data presented in this article. Furthermore, it completely disregards *choice* over one's parenting decisions. Admittedly, there is now little choice economically for many two-parent families in Ireland but to both work, yet their decision is determined by the market and not by explicit government policy. The prevalence of a more traditional notion of the family in Ireland today, and the way in which this influences policy, means that one-parent families often shoulder an additional burden. The key issues raised by the

findings of the study—the dual burden on those parenting alone in employment which remains unrecognized and the current lack of supports and services for this group of parents—are now discussed.

## Care

Concerns about the impact of working on the care of the children (rather than economic considerations alone) influence parents' decision to return to and/or to remain in paid employment. It is well rehearsed in the literature that "concern for the welfare of one's child(ren) are usually the main impulses behind the decisions that (all) parents make in relation to, for example, combining paid work with child care, or negotiating divorce, separation or re-partnering" (Williams, 2004, pp. 418-419). Daly and Klammer (2005) point out that "many mothers feel torn between children and work" (as cited in Millar et al., 2007, p. 30). Share et al. (2007) note, "the Irish mother continues to occupy the role of primary carer and life-giver, leading to pressures and tensions in the attempt to manage both work and domestic spheres" (p. 257). The One Parent Family Study results confirm that which has been highlighted elsewhere - care is the most important criterion in determining a mother's labour market entry (Skevik, 2005).

Current "activation proposals" clearly ignore the fact that the stresses, concerns, and challenges faced by parents in moving from full-time care to employment are heightened and that the balance between unpaid domestic work and paid employment is more difficult to achieve. Yet those who parent alone are keenly aware of these issues. The importance of parenting and children's well-being is a primary consideration in deciding whether to (re)enter employment. Effectively dual earners with the dual burden of care and employment have a shared burden. Under these proposals those who parent alone have a double burden to shoulder. Sometimes this will be manageable. But as Williams (2001) notes, crises are not always manageable inside the family and "these difficulties of time, costs of care and career development are compounded for working lone parents unless they have child care help from their own mothers or friends" (p. 472).

On similar activation policies in the United Kingdom under *The New Deal for Lone Parents*, Williams (2004) notes that "they are underpinned by an ethic of work, rather than an ethic of care and thus cannot resolve the problem of work/life balance they seek to address" (p. 408). The current Irish proposals exhibit the same characteristics. A policy informed by an ethics of care would facilitate adult workers to parent and promote family-friendly work practices that address family-based gender inequalities (Millar et al., 2007).

## *Child Care*

Until very recently the Irish state's child care policy can be described as one of nonintervention (Hodgins, Hogan, & Galvin, 2007). Despite numerous reports on the issue of child care provision since 1983 (Fine-Davis, 2004), the state only began to take a more active role in child care policy in response to a number of factors. These included EU funding, increased domestic demand, and an appreciation of the potential positive impact preschool education can have on children (Hayes & Bradley, 2006). The implementation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, its successor the National Childcare Investment Programme, alongside other initiatives since 1997, at first glance represented a new dawn for child care provision in Ireland.

However, beneath such activity, the nature of child care provision is markedly differentiated by mode of supply and cost of access. Reliance on informal, often free, sources of child care is a marked feature of one parent family life in Galway. Where respondents did enter employment, they did so with the support of their own family and waited until the children were old enough to go to school or care for themselves. Such findings resonate with the recent national figures available that indicate that approximately 33% of parents of preschool children use unpaid relatives to mind their children. This figure rises to 45% for parents of primary school-age children (Hodgins et al., 2007). Recent CSO statistics further corroborate this picture, with 82,600 (40.3%) families with preschool children having nonparental child care arrangements during the normal working day. Notably, this number drops to 66,700 (21.5%) for those families with children in primary school. This may reflect the fact that half of all Irish working women aged 25 to 54 years with two or more children younger than 16 years have part-time jobs. Indeed, Ireland has the highest rate of female part-time workers in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (CSO, 2006). In relation to child care arrangements for working families, although couples were more reliant on paid child care than those parenting alone, relatives are the main providers of (un)paid child care for all families (CSO, 2006).

According to Coakley (2005), child care "is constructed unproblematically as any other market based service, thus fracturing the link between care and family and its importance and place in people's lives" (p. 21). Despite government commitments to provide a total of 40,000 child care places between the years 2000 and 2006, there is still a significant gap in service provision. Where direct state provision has occurred—in the form of funding community initiatives—recent revisions have served to undermine much good work done previously. Places in state-funded community crèches



located in disadvantaged areas were split between those in receipt of welfare and those in employment on a 60:40 basis. Although aiming to be socially inclusive, such an arrangement also permitted the charging of lower rates for child care to those in receipt of a welfare payment. Crèches thus formulate charges on the basis of whether a parent is in receipt of a welfare payment or not. This increases the risk of those on low incomes and not in receipt of a payment being priced out of child care altogether (Sheridan, 2008). Thus, those parenting alone and relying on one income to support their children and themselves may find themselves without child care provision to avail of.

Immervoll and Barber's (2006) cross-national study of child care policies and the reconciliation of care and employment indicates the comparative bind that Irish parents find themselves in. Despite an overall increase in employment, the market model of child care in situ has resulted in the need for dual-earner families to spend 29% of their net income on child care for two children younger than 5 years (based on average production worker income). For those parenting alone, the cost is 51% of income, when tax rebates are factored in, rising to 58% for those on a reduced income (set at 67% of the standard used). In comparison, the cost of child care for those parenting alone at both 100% and 67% of income in the United Kingdom is 9% and 5%, respectively.

Notwithstanding the cost of early age child care in Ireland, the paucity of provision for school-age children is an equally important factor. The Irish child care debate is centered on the needs of those with preschool children to the relative neglect of those aged 5 years and older. Indeed, there is little statistical evidence on the types and extent of after-school care provided in Ireland (Hennessy & Donnelly, 2005), whereas Cournède (2006) identifies that one of the main difficulties for parents who work is the lack of after-school care. Many parents in our study identified suitable after-school care as a precondition for them (re)entering work. The need to address immediate issues—such as a child becoming ill during school time—and the broader issue of care during nonschool periods of the year also requires consideration. In discussing the need for after-school services, particularly in disadvantaged areas, Downes and Gilligan (2007) comment that “many significant life events happen for young people outside school and the school term, [thus] it is important that services are also available throughout the summer” (p. 481).

### *Service Provision Gaps*

The absence of a variety of services for those parenting alone including general support services and those that assist access to the labor market is

significant. Regarding wider support services, the majority of parents reported of organizations which were difficult to deal with and, for some, intimidating. The need for dedicated staff in statutory organizations who understand the heterogeneous nature of parenting alone is crucial to effective service provision. The need for staff to receive diversity and equality training should not be overlooked either, particularly given the recent increases in immigration. Research in other countries indicates that, if approached in the right manner, cultural barriers can be mitigated, at least to some extent (Holland, 2004). Finally, the difficulties experienced by those living in rural areas in accessing services—including but not exclusively child care—tend to exacerbate the challenges that many who parent alone face. Transport difficulties in getting into urban areas to access services are particularly problematic. Although some statutory organizations do have outreach offices located in rural areas, this is the exception rather than the norm. In their study of child care services in a part of rural Ireland, Walmsley and Fitzpatrick (2005) identify that there is great demand for child care provision which offers parents choice. Moreover, they note that

the ability to access transport determines whether rural children can access services or not. It is of great concern that children from transport rich families are accessing services that their neighbours from transport poor families cannot. Transport problems must be considered and budgeted for at the planning stage. (Walmsley & Fitzpatrick, 2005, p. 291)

In fact, a general appreciation of the challenges currently faced by those parenting alone, both personal and structural, needs to be addressed in any proposed policy development.

### *Suitable Employment*

Child well-being only increases in the event of maternal employment if or when the mothers' employment actually increases household income (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 1998). This indicates the important issue of "making work pay for parents," in addition to guaranteeing stability and continuity in employment. Despite recent increases in the employment rate of those parenting alone, many experience difficulties in the labor market (Russell and Corcoran 2001). Barriers include the high cost of child care, as well as the potential loss of rent supplement and other secondary welfare benefits (O'Connell & Russell, 2007). By requiring flexible and part-time employment, parents are limited in what jobs are available to them in terms of

quality and remuneration. When moving into the low-paid/skilled-labor market, there is the added problem of job insecurity. For those parenting alone, this can create stress as parents may move from welfare to low-paid work and sometimes move between the two. In addition, when emergencies do occur the lack of flexible and family-friendly work practices can make sustaining employment impossible.

## Conclusions

The practicalities of employment for those parenting alone in Ireland today present many challenges for them and their families. Employment itself is not the problem—it is the context in which it is presented as a solution to social exclusion. For paid employment to successfully address social exclusion, it should be facilitated in a proactive, positive way. There has to be a real choice for parents and recognition of the work that they already do. It cannot be stressed enough that currently services to support families in employment are largely provided by the market, and public services are still relatively underdeveloped in Ireland. The burden of this is borne by low-income families who cannot afford to pay. Finally, at what level of job availability and suitability can we compel those parenting alone into employment? Should the state continue to pursue the policy of employment requirements for this vulnerable group, an appreciation of the challenges faced by those parenting alone—personal and structural—must be incorporated into any planning process which aims to facilitate such parents in taking up part-time work, employment, or training opportunities.

Recent policy proposals regarding those parenting alone adopt a “work before care” stance and are thus likely to maintain the gendered division of labor both within the home and outside. As we have shown in this article, the lack of recognition of the dual burden of child care and work experienced by many of those parenting alone can create significant dependencies within families and appear to disproportionately affect women. More detailed national research on intrafamily time use patterns could help identify those family members who shoulder the burden of (un)paid domestic work, in particular in the context of multigenerational family networks.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Galway City Partnership, its affiliated service organizations, and all study participants for their input. For more information and the full report (including the questionnaire) go to [http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards\\_a\\_better\\_future-\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards_a_better_future-_full_report.pdf)

<[https://staffmail.nuigalway.ie/exchweb/bin/redirect.asp?URL=http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards\\_a\\_better\\_future\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://staffmail.nuigalway.ie/exchweb/bin/redirect.asp?URL=http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards_a_better_future_full_report.pdf)>. Also, many thanks to Debbie Collins, Michelle Gray, Susan Purdon, and Alice McGee from the National Centre for Social Research (United Kingdom) for their permission to use and modify their survey questionnaire.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The research upon which this article is based was funded by organizations comprising Galway City Partnership's Research on One Parent Families Exclusion (ROPE) Committee.

### References

- Allan, G. (1999). *A sociology of the family: A reader*. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Arensberg, C. M., & Kimball, S. T. (2001). *Family and community in Ireland* (3rd ed., with a new introduction by A. Byrne, R. Edmondson, & T. Varley). Ennis, County Clare, Ireland: CLASP Press. (Original work published 1940)
- Byrne A. (2003). Developing a sociological model for researching women's self and social identities. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10, 443-464.
- Central Statistics Office Ireland. (n.d.). *Census interactive tables for Censuses 1996, 2002, 2006*. Retrieved from <http://www.cso.ie/census/>
- Central Statistics Office Ireland. (2006, May 31). *Quarterly National Household Survey, Quarter 1 Childcare 2005*. Dublin, Ireland: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour\\_market/current/qnhs-childcare.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/current/qnhs-childcare.pdf)
- Central Statistics Office Ireland. (2007, November). *EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2006*. Dublin, Ireland: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/eu\\_silc/current/eusilc.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/eu_silc/current/eusilc.pdf)
- Coakley, A. (2005, November). *Mothers' welfare and labour market activation* (Working Paper Series 05/04). Dublin, Ireland: Combat Poverty Agency.
- Collins, D., Gray, M., Purdon, S., & McGee, A. (2006, September). *Lone parents and work: Developing new survey measures of the choices and constraints* (Department for Work and Pensions (UK) Working Paper No. 34). Retrieved from <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP34.pdf>
- Cournède, B. (2006). *Removing obstacles to employment for women in Ireland* (OECD Economics Department Working Paper No. 511). Paris, France: Organisation for

- Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from <http://ideas.repec.org/p/oec/eoaaaa/511-en.html>
- Daly, M., & Clavero, S. (2002). *Contemporary family policy: A comparative review of Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden and the UK*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration in association with the Department of Social and Family Affairs.
- Department of Social and Family Affairs. (2006). *Proposals to support lone parents*. Dublin, Ireland: Stationery Office.
- Downes, P., & Gilligan, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.
- Fahey, T. (2006). Family and family policy. In S. Healy, B. Reynolds, & M. Collins (Eds.), *Social policy in Ireland: Principles, practice and problems* (pp. 385-402). Dublin, Ireland: Liffey Press.
- Finch, J., & Mason, J. (1993). *Negotiating family responsibilities*. London, England: Routledge.
- Fine-Davis, M. (2004). The childcare policy debate in Ireland. *Administration*, 52(2), 36-56.
- Government of Ireland. (1998). *Commission on the family*. Dublin, Ireland: Stationery Office.
- Hayes, N., & Bradley, S. (2006). The childcare question. In B. Fanning & M. Rush (Eds.), *Care and social change in the Irish welfare economy* (pp. 163-178). Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press.
- Hennessy, E., & Donnelly, M. (2005). *After-school care in disadvantaged areas: The perspectives of children, parents and experts*. Dublin, Ireland: Combat Poverty Agency.
- Hodgins, M., Hogan, V., & Galvin, M. (2007). Reconciling work and family life: Policy and practice in Ireland. *Administration*, 54(4), 56-76.
- Holland, J. (2004, October). *Evaluation of the extension of the NDLP eligibility*. Retrieved from [http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/working\\_age/wa2004/209rep.pdf](http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/working_age/wa2004/209rep.pdf)
- Immervoll, H., & Barber, D. (2006, January). *Can parents afford to work? Childcare costs, tax-benefit policies and work incentives* (Institute for the Study of Labor Working Paper No. 1932). Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=878665>
- Inglis, T. (1980). *Moral monopoly: The Catholic Church in modern Irish society*. Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press.
- Lefebvre, P., & Merrigan, P. (1998, October). *Family background, family income, maternal work and child development*. Hull, Quebec, Canada: Human Resources Development Canada Publications Centre.
- Lewis, J. (2006). Work/family reconciliation, equal opportunities and social policies: *the interpretation of policy trajectories at the EU level and the meaning of gender equality*. *Journal of European Public Policy* 13(3), pp. 420-37.

- McCashin, A. (2004). *Social security in Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan.
- McGinnity, F., & Russell, H. (2007). Work rich, time poor? Time-use of women and men in Ireland. *Economic and Social Review*, 38, 323-354.
- McLaughlin, E. (1993). Ireland: Catholic corporatism. In A. Cochrane & J. G. Clarke (Eds.), *Comparing welfare states: Britain in international context* (pp. 205-237). London, England: Sage.
- McLaughlin, E. (2001). Ireland: From Catholic corporatism to social partnership. In A. Cochrane, J. G. Clarke, & S. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Comparing welfare states: Britain in international context* (2nd ed., pp. 223-260). London, England: Sage.
- Millar, M. (2003). Institutionalism "old" and "new": Exploring the mother and child scheme. In M. Adshead & M. Millar (Eds.), *Public administration and public policy in Ireland: Theory and methods* (pp. 129-146). London, England: Routledge.
- Millar, M., & Coen, L. (2008, June). *Compelling lone parents to work: A panacea for all ills or embedding social exclusion?* Paper presented at the British Social Policy Association Annual Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Millar, M., Coen, L., Rau, H., Donegan, M., Canavan, J., & Bradley, C. (2007). *Towards a better future: Research on labour market needs and social inclusion of one parent families in Galway city and county* (Report for the One Parent Family Research Committee, Galway City Partnership). Galway: Centre for Child and Family Research, National University of Ireland, Galway. Retrieved from [http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards\\_a\\_better\\_future\\_exec\\_summ\\_english.pdf](http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/sites/www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/files/towards_a_better_future_exec_summ_english.pdf)
- Murphy, M., & Millar, M. (2007). The NESC developmental welfare state: A glass half empty or a glass half full approach to active social policy reform. *Administration*, 55(3), 75-100.
- Nicholls, K. (2006). Why social partnership matters: Irish policies for work-life balance. *West European Politics*, 29(3), 513-539.
- O'Connell, P. J. O., & Russell, H. (2007). Employment and the quality of work. In T. Fahey, H. Russell, & C. T. Whelan (Eds.), *Best of times? The social impact of the Celtic Tiger* (pp. 43-66). Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.
- O'Connor, P. (1998). *Emerging voices: Women in contemporary Irish society*. Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.
- Pfenning, A., & Bahle, T. (Eds.). (2000). *Families and family policies in Europe: Comparative perspectives*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Rush, M. (2006). The politics of care. In B. Fanning & M. Rush (Eds.), *Care and social change in the Irish welfare economy*. Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press.
- Russell, H. and Corcoran, M. (2001). Report of the ESRI Lone Parent Focus Groups. Dublin: DSCFA.

- Scannell, Y. (1988). The constitution and the role of women. In B. Farrell (Ed.), *De Valera's constitution and ours* (pp. 123-136). Dublin, Ireland: Goldenbridge.
- Share, P., Tovey, H., & Corcoran, M. P. (2007). *A sociology of Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Gill and Macmillan.
- Sheridan, K. (2008, January 19). Who cares? *The Irish Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/newsfeatures/2008/0119/1200605154412.html>
- Skevik, A. (2005). Women's citizenship in the time of activation: The case of lone mothers in needs based welfare states. *Social Politics, 12*, 42-66.
- Walmsley, P., & Fitzpatrick, S. (2003). The Cross-Border Rural Childcare Project. *Child Care in Practice, 9*, 282-292.
- Williams, F. (2001). In and beyond New Labour: Towards a new political ethics of care. *Critical Social Policy, 21*, 467-493.
- Williams, F. (2004). What matters is who works: Why every child matters to New Labour. Commentary on the DfES Green Paper Every Child Matters. *Critical Social Policy, 24*, 406-427.