

Families and Single Fathers in Ireland*

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1. Introduction

No one approaching the theme of single parenthood can be unaware of the history of social exclusion which has accompanied it and the ostracism which awaited women who got pregnant outside marriage as well as the stigma which descended on their children and stayed with them into adult life (see for example, Connell, 1968). Prior to 1973 there were no state supports for single mothers. Single mothers and their children still face great difficulties but there have been improvements in public attitudes, in the laws governing illegitimacy, in income support, in family support services, etc., much of them as a result of the pioneering and campaigning work of organisations like Cherish and others (see for example, Farren and Dempsey, 1998). However less attention has been given to a systematic deterioration in the lot of single fathers and I think it is no exaggeration to say — as I hope to show in this paper - that single fathers are an extremely excluded and ostracised group in Ireland today. They are certainly among the least visible and the most voiceless and, like socially excluded groups generally, they are often seen as either dangerous, useless, self-destructive or irresponsible.

It is true that most single mothers are left with the baby; but there can be a fate worse than this: to be left without your baby and to be excluded from the intimacy of family life and the parenting of one's children. It might be said that some single fathers choose to exclude themselves from their children and from family life but, no more than single mothers or indeed any of us, they do not choose the circumstances in which those choices are made: the conditioning within their own family and community, the poverty of childhood, the experience of educational underachievement, the hopelessness of early school leaving and subsequent unemployment. Of course not all single fathers fit this stereotype but many do, and enough of them do to make us concerned about what is happening in disadvantaged communities where young men are not being supported to take up one of the most important archetypal roles which a man can take up — to be a father.

In making the case for single fathers, I wish to declare my intention at the outset to avoid any divisiveness or any suggestion that single mothers are receiving too much support or that any improvement in the lot of single fathers should be at the expense of single mothers. There is nothing to be gained from creating competition between the needs of parents; if there is any hint of this it is certainly not my intention. I wish only to create a

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space where the needs of single fathers can be seen in a similarly compassionate light to the needs of single mothers so that appropriate responses can be developed to meet the family needs of both and of their children.

One of the difficulties which arises in preparing a paper like this is that lone fatherhood does not exist in any statistical sense essentially because those who collect statistical data do not seem to recognise that families and households are not the same thing. It is of course recognised that there can be more than one family in a household but equally — and the reality is that this is increasingly the case — there can be one family in more than one household as when parents are living apart and the father is not living with the children. Is a father who is not living with his children not still a father and part of the psychological reality of that family? Strictly speaking, it is a misnomer to speak of one and two parent families since every child has two parents irrespective of whether they are married, separated, single, cohabiting or living apart; in this sense, there are no one parent families — only one and two parent households. Arguably, the confusion between household and family — in public policy as much as in popular culture — has been damaging to our understanding of families and how to support them and is reflective of a lag in the development of language to accurately describe the newly emerging household configurations in which families present themselves.

As a consequence of the way families are defined, no information is collected on single fathers in the Census of Population, the Labour Force Survey (and its replacement, the Quarterly National Household Survey), Vital Statistics, the Living in Ireland Survey, etc. We collect information on the age of mothers at the birth of each child but nothing on fathers, we collect information on single mothers and poverty but nothing on single fathers and poverty, we collect information on the participation of single mothers in the labour market but nothing on the participation of single fathers, etc. The only information we have on lone fathers is collected as part of studies on lone mothers and, in these instances, lone fathers are seen only through the eyes of the mothers (see, for example, Flanagan and Richardson, 1992; McCashin, 1996). Not only are there no equivalent statistics collected on lone fathers as on lone mothers but most commentaries on those statistics never advert to the implications of their absence. It is surely symptomatic of the exclusion of lone fathers that no one even collects statistics on them since society only values what it measures. This is a point that most women can easily understand since many of them have made the point that no one measures the value of childrearing or housework because it is not given the same value as work outside the home. Similarly no one sees any point in collecting information about single fathers.

I will begin therefore by looking at the different types of households in which families now exist in Ireland and then examine more closely the characteristics of single parent households, especially the characteristics of single fathers. I then examine the barriers which currently exclude the involvement of single men from fatherhood and family life and, along the way, make some suggestions that might improve the situation.

2. Different Types of Household in Ireland

We are all familiar with the traditional division of labour between family and work where men played a breadwinning role by taking responsibility for work outside the home and women played a home-making role by taking responsibility for rearing the children inside the home. In a statistical sense, this meant that most traditional families had one earner — usually the father — or, in some disadvantaged communities, they had no earner. The situation today, based on 1996 data, is very different to this, as Table 1 reveals.

Table 1 Number of Income Earners in One and Two Parent Households, 1996

Category	Two Parent Household	One Parent Household
	%	%
No Earner	11	64
One Earner	50	36
Two Earner	39	0
Total (Column %)*	100	100
Total (Row %)**	86	14

In this table the concept of family is restricted to those families where there is at least one child under the age of 15.

*Based on the Labour Force Survey, 1996. ** Based on the Census of Population, 1996.

Source: Cited in McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, p.21.

Table 1 is a very good snap shot of the economic structure of family life in Ireland at the present time. A number of features are worth noting. First, in overall terms, we see that the majority of families in Ireland (86%) live in two parent households. The proportion of one parent households (14%) is less than might be expected given that the proportion of births outside marriage (30%) is now double this. The reason for this is partly due to the way in which I have confined families to units where at least one child must be under the age of 15; if all families are included, then one parent households would constitute up to 20% of all families. However there are other reasons why it is difficult to be exact in measuring the proportion of lone parent households at any point in time — all of them due to the constant inflows and outflows into this state:

1. Births sometimes precede marriage. As in other northern European countries, there is now a trend where births precede rather than succeed marriage thus indicating a decline not in marriage per se but in the role of marriage as a gateway to family formation; if anything this development may indicate that marriage is increasingly seen as a contract between actual rather than potential parents. One study of recipients of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance in the late 1980s suggested that a significant proportion ceased claiming after a few years because they got married (O Grady, 1992).
2. One parent households arise not just through births outside marriage but also through divorce / separation, or widowhood. In fact, as Table 2 shows, entry to one parent status (based again on families where at least one of the children is under the age of 15) is more likely through separation from marriage than through

births outside marriage. In other words, there is no simple relationship between lone parenthood generally and births outside marriage.

Table 2 Marital Status of One Parent Households, 1996

Category	One Parent Household %
Separated	47
Never married	37
Widowed	13
Married	3
Total*	100

In this table the concept of family is restricted to those families where there is at least one child under the age of 15. *Based on the Labour Force Survey, 1996.

Source: Cited in Fahey, Fitz Gerald and Maitre, 1998, p.196.

3. The extent of re-marriage, though low, is growing and trebled in the 10 years between 1986 and 1996, even before divorce was introduced. This can turn a one parent household into a two parent household.
4. The extent of cohabitation among nominally or administratively defined one parent households can mean that official statistics over-estimate the true extent of these households. For example, one study of unmarried mothers found that almost 20% were cohabiting with the father of their child and, perhaps even more positively, over 50% of the mothers rated the relationship with the father as good or very good (Flanagan and Richardson, 1992, pp. 30-33).

Returning to the data in Table 1 we can observe a number of additional features about the structure of family life in Ireland today which are particularly important. One of the most important is that fathers are now the breadwinner in only half of all two parent households; in 93% of one earner households the breadwinner is the father. In this sense, the traditional pattern where fathers were the sole breadwinner is now in decline and, since the time this data was collected in 1996, the proportion of fathers in the role of sole breadwinner has probably fallen still further, although of course men are still much more likely to be working full-time and women to be working part-time. Nevertheless these changes have huge implications for the way in which fathers and mothers organise their home and work life and the re-negotiation of roles and expectations which this entails. At the same time it would be unwise to underestimate the extent to which a substantial proportion of families have only one breadwinner — typically the man — and the proportion of families with full-time mothers is very considerable. These two types of household have quite different needs and interests and we see these emerging in debates over, for example, the funding and provision of childcare.

By contrast, the situation with one parent households is that the majority (64%) have no earner and their only source of income is likely to be the One Parent Family Payment. The high level of unemployment among one

parent households underlines one of the most important structural dimensions of lone parenthood namely its powerful association — both as cause and as consequence - with socio-economic disadvantage. This is evident in the weak labour market position of many lone parents and, in turn, is a reflection of relatively low levels of education and skill. This is illustrated in Table 3 which compares the education level of married mothers and lone mothers and shows that lone mothers (23%) are more than twice as likely as married mothers (9%) to have no qualifications while married mothers (24%) are twice as likely as lone mothers (12%) to have a third level qualification. This has huge implications for the earning power of these different groups of women.

Table 3 Highest Educational Qualification of Married and Lone Mothers, 1996

Level of Education	Married Mothers	Lone Mothers
	%	%
No Qualifications	9	23
Junior Certificate	25	38
Leaving Certificate	42	27
Third Level Qualification	24	12
Total (Column %)*	100	100

In this table the concept of mother is restricted to those who have at least one child under the age of 5.

*Based on the Labour Force Survey, 1996. I am grateful to John Fitz Gerald, ESRI, for supplying me with this table.

The most important implication of Table 3 in the present context is that for every single mother in a weak labour market position there is a corresponding single father in a similar and possibly worse position. We know this from research because Irish society, like industrialised societies elsewhere, is highly endogamous in the sense that marriage and procreation almost invariably occur between men and women from exactly the same social class positions. One of the few studies of unmarried mothers in Ireland found that unmarried mothers tended to belong to the same social class as their partners (Flanagan and Richardson, 1992, p22). We also know that the labour market position of single fathers is probably worse than that of single mothers since, according to all the School Leavers Surveys throughout the 1990s, boys are at least twice as likely as girls to leave school early or leave without qualifications (see for example, Department of Labour, 1991, Tables 2A and 2B; Department of Enterprise and Employment, 1993, Tables 5A and 5B; McCoy and Whelan, 1996, Tables 11A and 11B; McCoy, Doyle and Williams, 1999, Tables 11A and 11B).

It is clear from Table 3 therefore that there is a powerful class dimension to the emergence of lone parenthood. It is true that one can find single mothers and single fathers in all social classes but it would be misleading to claim that single parenthood is evenly distributed across those classes. Single parenthood is primarily associated — both as cause and effect — with socio-economic disadvantage and is strongly shaped by the way in which the state intervenes to support families in disadvantaged circumstances. That is the context in which single mothers and single fathers make their choices about family life and it is against that background that I want to say a little more about single fathers.

3. Understanding Single Fathers

The reality of life for single mothers and single fathers is that most of them live in relatively disadvantaged circumstances; they have low levels of education and poor earning capacity; many of them are not able to meet the cost of independently supporting a family. Without the intervention of the state, family life in these disadvantaged communities would be virtually impossible. However the particular way in which the state intervenes to help lone mothers and fathers — and the ideologies which support this intervention - is such as to add to the social exclusion of lone fathers and, in the long-term term, further weakens the fabric of those families and communities. As a result, many lone fathers not only face exclusion from the labour market and an important source of identity and fulfilment through work, but they also face the even deeper form of social exclusion from family life and an irreplaceable stakeholding in society through parenting their children either as breadwinners or homemakers or both. Many children in these families also suffer from not having a father living with them or even in regular contact with them.

It is not too much of an exaggeration to state that many lone fathers are virtually an outcast group in our society. Many of them live outside of society's inclusive structures of work and family life. Most lone fathers are not drug users but it is surely not without significance that most drug users are men (around 70%) and most of them (around 75%) are lone fathers (see McKeown and Fitzgerald, 1999; McKeown, Fitzgerald and Deehan, 1993). Most lone fathers are not in prison but it is surely not without significance that almost all prisoners are disadvantaged men and most of them (around 70%) are fathers of whom 60% have lost contact with their children (see O Mahony, 1997, pp. 37-38). Moreover many drug users and prisoners have had disruptive family backgrounds themselves and many would not have seen their fathers play a positive breadwinning or homemaking role. In most advantaged communities you will find men involved in various neighbourhood and community activities — particularly in terms of organising sport and leisure activities for their own and other children - but in many disadvantaged communities there are extremely few men willing or able to do these activities. Many children grow up in fatherless families and fatherless communities.

In painting this picture I do not wish to imply that all lone fathers are living in such extreme forms of alienation; they are not. However I do wish to imply that that this is the extreme place where one will find lone fathers and it is not unrelated to their exclusion from work and family life. The malaise which affects many men in extremely disadvantaged communities is symptomatic of their exclusion from work and family life and, as Carl Jung reminded us, symptoms never lie. It was also a contemporary of Jung, Sigmund Freud who said that if you can work and love you can live a normal life; the conditioning and life experiences of many lone fathers suggest that they do not meet Freud's standard for living a normal life.

It is now appropriate to look more closely at the factors which exclude lone fathers from family life and, in doing so, to see how systematic this exclusion has been — even to the extent that their exclusion is either

invisible (so that lone fatherhood does not exist as a reality in any documented or statistical form as I have already suggested) or, when it is made visible, it is explained away by claiming that it is actually a form of self-exclusion by men (as when lone fathers are labelled as useless, feckless, avoiding responsibility, etc). As I see it, there are four main barriers which exclude lone fathers from family life:

1. Ideological barriers which take the form of seeing families from either a mother's perspective or a supposedly child's perspective but rarely from a father's perspective;
2. Legal barriers which take the form of excluding the single father from full parenting rights to the child;
3. Income support barriers as a result of the operation of the One Parent Family Payment which support rather than support fathers;
4. Barriers through the absence of family support services for the parenting role of lone fathers.

Before discussing these barriers I wish to make two general points. First, we are dealing here with only one set of barriers confronting lone fathers; many face similar barriers in the world of work and it can be difficult to imagine just how restrictive their life chances can be. Second, as already pointed out, I do not wish to imply that lone mothers do not also face barriers; many lone mothers are already living in poverty and need all the support they can get (Nolan and Watson, 1999). However I am arguing that interventions in support of family life need to be less divisive between mothers and fathers and the removal of these barriers could have long-term benefits not only for fathers but for mothers and children as well. We already know that some single parent households are over-burdened and this is evident in the much greater risk of their children going into care by comparison with two parent households (Department of Health and Children, 1999a). So the removal of barriers affecting single fathers must be part of a much more supportive strategy to support single parent households generally.

4. Ideological Barriers

I have already referred to what we now like to call the traditional division of labour between men and women where men took responsibility for work outside the home and women took responsibility for the family inside the home. Despite all the changes which have occurred in family life in the last few decades there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this traditional view is still the dominant ideology which shapes — sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously - the thinking of many men and women about the family especially among those who would be least likely to call themselves traditional. I will offer a few examples by way of illustration.

One of the best places to find ideologies is in the unspoken assumptions of researchers! I can afford to say this since I am researcher myself and know from my own experience! A recent book entitled *Family Life and Family Policies in Europe* (Kaufman, Kuijsten, Schulze and Strohmeier, 1997) brought together a co-ordinated study of the family in 10 European countries. This European-wide study makes no reference whatever to the role of fathers in defining the themes for the research; its terms of reference cover:

an overview of the main demographic trends in the 1980s that shape family structures; an analysis of the influences on women's labour-market position, trends in education and housing developments as decisive forces in shaping women's everyday family lives; a discussion of the national situation with respect to family policy; and the formulation of hypotheses on the way in which family policy, or the lack of it, has an impact on the everyday life of women in different life forms (Kaufman, Kuijsten, Schulze and Strohmeier, 1997, p.5). These terms of reference suggest that families are essentially the business of women.

Similarly a recent study on crisis pregnancy focused exclusively on women (Mahon, Conlon and Dillon, 1998). Not a single man was interviewed. The approach in this study effectively implies that pregnancy is a women's issue and actually reinforces the suggestion that men have no responsibility for pregnancy. This approach, in addition to being dangerous, is also a way of excluding men from a voice in family issues.

A second example is the Commission on the Family (1996 and 1998). At a time when there are explicit guidelines on gender balance on all state bodies to the effect that there must be 40% of both men and women, it is remarkable that only 30% of the Commission on the Family were men and, in its final year, this fell to 20%. Why was that? Does it imply that families are still the business of women? In the case of single and lone parent families, the Commission dealt at length with the issue of maintenance since, according to its Interim Report (1996, pp.104-108), this was raised primarily by lone mothers but the issues of guardianship, custody and access raised mainly by lone fathers were virtually ignored. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is hard not to notice that, at least in this regard, the concerns of mothers seemed to receive greater attention than the concerns of fathers (McKeown, 1999, p.209).

A third example is childcare and the more general issue of what are called family-friendly measures in the work place. These issues are typically seen as a women's issues even though their overall objective is to help all parents reconcile the competing demands of work and family life (see for example, Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993, Chapter Three; Employment Equality Agency, 1996). As a result of this type of thinking most family-friendly measures in the workplace are actually taken up by women (Fynes, Morrissey, Roche, Whelan and Williams, 1996, p.227) and the net effect of this, however unintended, is to reinforce the existing gender division of labour, both at home and at work (McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, p.151).

All of these examples suggest that families are still seen as the domain of women and the effects of this, whether intended or not, are: (1) to distort the reality of fathers' actual involvement and contribution to family life; (2) to increase the burden of responsibilities placed on mothers; and (3) to narrow the vision of what is possible within families for both men and women. The most powerful illustration of this can be found again in the report of the Commission on the Family where the only issue about lone fathers which is given any serious consideration is maintenance, notwithstanding the fact that one of the defining characteristics of single fathers is their disadvantaged position in the labour market and notwithstanding the fact that one of the core principles

advocated by the Commission was co-parenting. The reality of co-parenting within this ideology seems to be that men are still, and only, breadwinners. In summary then, it is hard not to get the impression that much of the prevailing ideology about the family continues to assume that men's role is actually outside or peripheral to the family.

5. Legal Barriers

The legal barriers to lone fathers are already well known and arise both in the Constitution and in law. The main barrier in the Constitution is that an unmarried father is not part of a family within the legal meaning of Article 41 of the Constitution nor is he a parent within the meaning of Article 42 of the Constitution; as a result, he has no personal right to his child which the State is bound to protect under Article 40.3. Elsewhere I have argued that this could be addressed by a constitutional provision which guarantees that a mother and father have equal rights to a child where the child is conceived through their mutual consent. The right of each child to know and be cared for by both its parents, whether living together or not, should also be enshrined in the Constitution. The exercise of these rights would be regulated by law and always in the best interests of the child. (McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, p.159).

One of the remarkable features about the debate on giving equal constitutional rights to unmarried mothers and fathers is the reasons advanced for not giving those rights to all unmarried fathers. As framed by the Constitution Review Group there are two reasons advanced for not giving equal rights to unmarried fathers. One reason is that this would include fatherhood resulting from rape, incest, or sperm donership (Constitution Review Group, 1996, p.326). At one level this is a valid argument since no one would wish parenting rights to be conferred on a man in such circumstances. But using these exceptional circumstances as a way of excluding all unmarried fathers from equality with unmarried mothers seems to imply a remarkably negative and exclusionary attitude to these men. Most conceptions outside marriage do not involve rape, incest, or sperm donership.

The second reason for excluding unmarried fathers from equal constitutional rights with the mother is that it might include fathers who have not had a stable relationship with the mother prior to birth, or subsequent to birth, with the child (Ibid, p.326). As regards the relationship with the mother, the presumption here is that fathers must take the consequences of not having a relationship with the mother but not vice versa. As regards the relationship with the child, the presumption here is that the father must first establish such a relationship with the child but this may not be possible if no right exists to establish that relationship.

My purpose here is simply to highlight the generally exclusionary and negative attitudes which exist towards single fathers. Underlying these attitudes seems to be a distinction between deserving and undeserving fathers which is resonant of a poor law distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. As if to confirm this, the Constitution Review Group makes a final warning that in drafting any constitutional amendment care

would have to be taken with the drafting to avoid giving rights to natural fathers who have no relationship with the natural mother or no relationship, other than a biological one, with the child (Ibid).

In the realm of law, the main provisions relate to the establishment of paternity and the rights of guardianship. In both areas, single fathers have no automatic rights. Effectively, maternity and paternity are established by registering the birth of the child through placing the mother's and father's name respectively on the birth certificate. At present there is a legal obligation to place the mother's name on the birth certificate and the father's name if married but not if unmarried; if the mother and father consent to placing the single father's name on the birth certificate this can only be done in the Registrar's Office not in the maternity hospital. In other words, the single father faces a double barrier to establishing paternity: (1) the consent of the mother and (2) having to go to the Registrar's Office. This situation is exclusionary of unmarried fathers but is also contrary to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, Article 7, Paragraph 1 of which states: The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents. Commenting on this situation, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child — whose function is to oversee implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child - has expressed its concern about the disadvantaged situation of children born of unmarried parents due to the lack of appropriate procedures to name the father in the birth registration of the child (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1998, paragraph 17, p.7; see also The Children's Rights Alliance, 1997, paragraphs 99-101, p.23).

It is difficult to know what effect this situation has on fathers — other than to make them feel inferior to the mother *vis à vis* the child — but its effects on the child are generally well known. I cite only the recorded experience of the writer Hugh Leonard who, on discovering that the stroke of a pen took the place of his father's name on the birth certificate, observed that: If my mother had thought to invent a name for my father, my own life would certainly have been different. I have always been a cuckoo in any and every Irish nest. I say this as a simple reality (Leonard, 1995, pp.36-38). The exact number of fathers and children whose rights are not being vindicated in this regard is difficult to estimate but in 1998 the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs surveyed a sample of 1,000 unmarried applicants for One-Parent Family Payment and found that 79% of them had both parents names on each child's birth certificate. A similar survey was carried out in 1999 on 1,000 separated applicants for One-Parent Family Payment found that 83% of these had both parents names on each child's birth certificate. In other words, about 20% of the children of unmarried fathers — equivalent to around 3,000 children in 1998 - may never know or be able to find out — who their natural father is. A similar proportion of children of separated parents seem to be in the same situation.

On the issue of guardianship, the unmarried father may obtain guardianship rights through the consent of the mother or, failing that, by applying to the District Court. This is clearly discriminatory and reflects again the negative light in which unmarried fathers are held. A positive view of unmarried fathers would suggest that

these fathers be given automatic guardianship rights with the mother while at the same time there should be clear grounds on which those rights might be challenged, restricted or even removed. Why should our underlying presumptions about single fathers be negative rather than positive and why should they be different to the presumptions we make about other categories of parent? A more positive, inclusive attitude to single fathers would have the effect of supporting the objective of co-parenting for which there is widespread support.

This review of the legal barriers affecting unmarried fathers underlines the negative and distrustful perspective which is usually adopted to these already marginalised men and serves only to alienate them further from fatherhood and family life. Beyond the strict letter of the law, the symbolic messages communicated by existing legal provisions affecting unmarried fathers are probably harmful to family life in disadvantaged communities and it is hard to see how they are in the best interests of children. It is difficult to find anything in the existing legal provisions for unmarried fathers that could be said to be helpful or supportive of disadvantaged men in taking up a responsible fathering role.

6. Income Support Barriers

The main source of income in single parent households is the One Parent Family Payment; note here again how the term family is used as a synonym for household! The amount involved is modest but it has the benefit of being reliable and secure. For any single parent, but especially parents living close to the poverty line, it is essential to have a reliable and secure source of income, however modest. The One Parent Family Payment is therefore vital to the survival of single parent households. Most of those in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment (97%) are mothers not only because they usually have sole custody of the child but also because, in most instances I suspect, the unmarried father is unable to provide either a reliable source of income or an amount of income that is equal to the One Parent Family Payment. In these families, the state takes over the breadwinning role of the father but — and this is the difficulty — it does so in a way that supplants rather than supports the fathering role.

A crucial condition of the One Parent Family Payment, from the perspective of single fathers, is that the parent in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment cannot cohabit. The One Parent Family Payment therefore inhibits cohabitation. Even more divisively, the One Parent Family Payment inhibits co-parenting since single parents who have joint and equal custody of a child are not eligible for the payment. As such, the One Parent Family Payment is deeply undermining of family structures in disadvantaged communities.

In practice the One Parent Family Payment can turn single fathers into a risk rather than a guarantee of the family income. Even the mother who is successful in getting maintenance from the father finds that, except in certain circumstances, the One Parent Family Payment is correspondingly reduced thereby making the father's net contribution redundant. Moreover, even where cohabitation occurs with the consent of the mother — and is therefore technically illegal - the One Parent Family Payment leaves the father in a wholly ambiguous situation

of living in the home where he is wanted but not supposed to be. For all of these reasons, the One Parent Family Payment undermines single fathers and, notwithstanding its benefits to mothers, it is now time to ask if there is not a less divisive way of supporting single parents and their children in disadvantaged communities.

None of these observations imply in any way that there should be any reduction in the level of support for one parent households; if anything it should be increased. However it does imply that a review of this form of income support would be timely with a view to ensuring a significant improvement in the economic capacity of both single mothers and single fathers so that both are able to participate equally and as fully as possible in the upbringing of their children. The present situation undermines single fathers and family life generally and may not be in the best interests of children. Of course, this is something that is already well known to many of those who live and work with families in disadvantaged communities; it is disappointing therefore that these issues were not adequately addressed in a recent review of the One-Parent Family Payment (see Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000)

7. Family Support Barriers

Family support is a way of helping vulnerable families to cope with the demands of parenting and to overcome their difficulties (McKeown, 2000). After years of neglect, Irish family support services are now in an expansionary phase. In 1998, the Government launched Springboard, an initiative of 15 family support projects. In 1999, the Government also committed itself establishing 100 Family and Community Centres throughout the country in line with a recommendation in the report of the Commission on the Family (Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats, 1999, p.16; Commission on the Family, 1998, p.17). In addition, the National Development Plan 2000-2006 contains a substantial allocation of funds to childcare, community and family support, and youth services all of which are supportive, directly or indirectly, of family life (Ireland, 1999, pp.192-195). The importance of family support has also been underlined in the new Guidelines for the Welfare and Protection of Children which devotes a separate chapter to family support services (Department of Health and Children, 1999b, Chapter Seven).

The reality of family support services and social services generally is that they are typically about supporting mothers not fathers; as one reviewer put it, family support is characterised by the predominant focus on mothers and the apparent invisibility of fathers (Roberts and Macdonald, 1999, p.63; see also French, 1998, pp.187-188; 1995; Murphy, 1996, p.95). There is a good deal of research and practice to suggest that fathers tend to be avoided by professionals — and possibly vice versa — and there is great uncertainty among professionals about how to approach fathers and work with them (see McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, Chapter Seven). In social work as in family support, parenting is treated as synonymous with mothering and this suggests that some scepticism is needed when inclusive terms like parent support are used to describe interventions which, consciously or not, effectively filter out fathers (Buckley, 1998). The reality, as many

commentators have noted, is that there are virtually no strategies and interventions to involve and support fathers (see, for example, French, 1998, pp.187-188; see also Rylands, 1995; Murphy, 1996, p.95).

The absence of support services for fathers in general and single fathers in particular is also evident in the prison service. According to the Governor of Mountjoy Prison, John Lonergan, the parenting status of men tends to be treated as irrelevant by the prison authorities even though many of these men miss out on the most formative years of their children's lives. By contrast, the prison authorities explicitly take the parenting status of women into account and every effort is made to sustain links between mothers and their children. Imagine the difference if every father in prison was encouraged and facilitated to keep in touch with his children! Similarly with the treatment of drug users. As already indicated, most drug users are men (around 70%) and most are fathers (around 75%) but there are no specific initiatives for addicted men or fathers; by contrast there are two separate initiatives for addicted mothers in the Greater Dublin Area. Again, I reiterate that support is needed for these mothers but, by the same reasoning, it is also needed for fathers as well.

As in the area of income support, the interventions of the state in the area of family support have little to offer the single father. It is true that funding has been made available for men's groups since 1994 and that is a positive development. But it is only a beginning and a much more radical change is needed in the way state services generally address the needs of single and other vulnerable fathers.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to describe what we know about the characteristics of single fathers. The picture which emerges is that most single fathers, like most single mothers, are a highly disadvantaged group in Irish society and live close to or below the poverty line. Although single fathers are not typically drug users or prisoners it is remarkable how large a proportion of these groups are made up of single fathers. We know that single mothers tend to occupy a weak position in the labour market and this is even truer of single fathers. Single parenthood therefore cannot be dissociated from the experience of poverty and disadvantage. For single fathers however the general experience of social exclusion tends to be further compounded by exclusion from family life and an active role in parenting their children.

My core argument is that the intervention of the state in the lives of these disadvantaged families is such as to weaken the fabric of family life in those communities through its overall ideology of treating parenting as synonymous with mothering, through its laws which seriously discriminate against single fathers, and through its income and family support measures which supplant rather than support the position of single fathers.

The challenge of addressing this situation is not an easy one if only because many single fathers are themselves unaware of their own alienation and often have little sense of common purpose with other men in similar

situations. But it is a situation which needs to be addressed as many of those who live and work in disadvantaged communities readily acknowledge.

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