

# ***Christine Todd: Social stigma makes parenting alone that much harder***

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By Christine Todd



The stereotype of a single parent is a Maori sole mother under 20 on Domestic Purposes Benefit with kids to different fathers and lazy to boot.

Sole parents are often identified as an economic and social "problem" in political debate and by the media. But these stereotypes themselves affect social attitudes and undermine the mental and emotional well-being of sole parents and their families.

Demographers suggest that single parent families are an inevitable reflection of an increasingly complex and diverse society. Greater sexual liberalisation has meant that today less than 50 per cent of the adult population is married and 20 per cent choose to cohabit.

And while marriage rates have declined, divorce rates have increased. Only 3 per cent of sole mothers are under 20 and almost 60 per cent are Pakeha.

Statistics New Zealand figures project single parent families to increase from 31 to 38 per cent of all families with dependent children, between 2001 and 2021.

The child poverty rate in New Zealand, at 16.3 per cent, is high by OECD standards, but for children in single parent households this figure increases to 47 per cent.

The DPB provides single mothers and their children with a below subsistence level income. In 2004, 60 per cent of single parent families in New Zealand were considered to have low living standards.

Unsurprising if we consider that half of all single parent families rely on the DPB as their only source of income, and that the level of this income is set below the income poverty threshold.

Therefore for single mothers, neither benefits nor low wage work necessarily provide enough income to cover basic expenses or to raise their families out of poverty.

Mothers on the DPB are seen as "problematic", for their lack of paid work. Paid work is identified as the key element of "good" citizenship and therefore the policy objective. This argument ignores research that indicates there are barriers to single mothers entering and sustaining paid work, including suitable job availability, low skills and qualifications, limited work experience, health issues and the access and affordability of good childcare.

Single parents are also "time-poor" as they juggle multiple household roles. They are therefore more likely to find part-time work that is low status, poorly paid and lacking employment benefits or job security.

My research was based on interviews with women who were typical single mothers on the DPB (aged between 30 and 50, post separation or divorce). Almost half reported suffering symptoms of poor mental and physical health as a consequence of stress relating to single mothering on the DPB.

They reported feelings of inadequacy, stigma, failure and low self-esteem as a result of the way they are depicted as "bludgers and second-class citizens". They said that negative social attitudes impacted on the willingness of family, friends and institutions such as Winz to provide material and emotional support.

These single mothers also resisted negative representations. They argued that mothering was the most important job in the world and their children were better adjusted and equipped because of their conscientious and devoted parenting. They also argued that receiving the DPB was the only reasonable way of balancing a single parenting workload with personal well-being.

Combining parenting and paid work was extremely difficult and exhausting.

International research suggests that an increased number of single mothers are declaring their independence of men and coupled relationships and claiming a legitimate space to live and parent alone.

Some scholars argue that policy discussions that overlook the value of independence, control over decision-making and peace of mind for women, particularly those who have been in abusive relationships, risk compromising these important values. Others argue that single mothers are modern society's "miner's canary". They say that "people who are denigrated and marginalised are more sensitive to dangers in the environment that have the potential to hurt us all". Therefore the health of single parent families is one way to gauge the well-being of families generally and of society.

Single mothers are expected to "do it all". They are expected to engage in full-time work, to sustain independent households and to raise healthy, well-balanced children. These expectations may be unrealistic.

Single mothers play important roles in raising healthy, balanced children in an increasingly fractured society and provide strong and independent female role models for the 21st century. Policy-makers in this rapidly diversifying social context have an obligation to ensure that the needs and values of single mothers are understood and accurately represented.

**\* Christine Todd, a post-graduate researcher at the University of Auckland, has studied the way sole mothers on the DPB handle negative representations of their position in society.**