

**Single mothers and the effects of intensive  
aid on the quality of their lives:  
The examples of The Netherlands and Cyprus**

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Comparative European Social Research and Theory

## CESRT Comparative European Social Research and Theory

Comparative European Social Research and Theory (CESRT) is a Hogeschool Zuyd research centre embedded in the Faculty of Social Studies. CESRT is designed to deepen current social work education programmes, to professionalise teachers and to enhance social professional practice. The applied social research conducted by CESRT centers upon the processes of social exclusion and inclusion.

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## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
- Comparative Cases .....	1
- Models of welfare .....	1
- Social policy .....	2
<b>General objective</b> .....	3
<b>Single mothers in the Netherlands</b> .....	4
- Intensive social aid by Xonar .....	4
<b>Single mothers in Cyprus</b> .....	6
- Intensive social aid in Cyprus .....	7
<b>Interviews: the key research instruments</b> .....	8
- The indicators .....	8
<b>The Dutch Case</b> .....	9
- Results of the Dutch interviews .....	9
<b>The Cypriot Case</b> .....	12
- Results of the Cyprus project .....	12
<b>Conclusions: The Dutch case and the Cypriot case</b> .....	16
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	18
<b>About the authors</b> .....	21

## Introduction

The number of single-parent households has increased markedly over the past two decades in virtually every major industrialized nation, with the exception of Japan (Burns & Scott, 1994; Santrock, 1999). Although the specific reasons and consequences of this trend vary somewhat from nation to nation, according to Blankenhorn (1995), this family structure is being blamed for a wide spectrum of developmental problems in children, ranging from health problems to academic failure. Such condemnation though, is often linked to a distorted stereotype, such as that of the single mother with limited education and limited social support. This mother neglects her children, has no ambition and spends her time collecting welfare cheques and watching hour upon hour of television. In some countries it is easy to demonstrate that this stereotype is false. However in other countries, studies on single parent families, and in particular on single mothers, are limited although all the indications show that the number of these families will continue to rise. In examining the phenomenon of single parenthood, and single motherhood in particular, we expose the inadequacies of a "welfare system which assumes women's dependency, their responsibility for care, and a partial involvement in the labour market" (Williams, 1997, p. 272). In some European countries, single mothers are treated as prospective breadwinners, and in others they are treated "first and foremost as mothers". This is because they are not required to register for work until their youngest child is 16 years old; however, this also means that these mothers remain dependent on low state benefits unless they can earn sufficient income. Recently, legislation in numerous European countries has been under attack by policy makers and social scientists because of trends which are shifting the financial dependency of single mothers away from the state and on to the biological father.

## Comparative Cases

This comparative cross-cultural paper set out to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences between the situation of single mothers in the Netherlands and Cyprus. The research offers a deeper understanding of differences between the two societies, their structures, cultures, socio-economic settings and social service institution, and in particular, the intensive aid services for single mothers. The results of this paper suggest a need for new ideas and new approaches regarding this type of aid in the home countries; the consequences for social work are also considered.

## Models of welfare

To compare the social policy and models of welfare, and their impact on the position of single mothers in the Netherlands and Cyprus it is necessary to clarify differences in their social and economic systems. In a joint publication on *Social Europe* from the Dutch CPB and SCP (2003) the authors refer to Gøsta Esping-Andersen whose research distinguishes between different types of welfare states in Europe (Dekker *et al.*, 2003). In the EU, according to Esping-Anderson, a distinction can be made between the Scandinavian countries which have high levels of public provision for the entire population and which are directed towards securing greater equality; the Anglo-Saxon countries with limited public provision for citizens who are unable to secure adequate provisions via the market; central European countries which operate mainly via employee insurance and semi public arrangements; and southern European countries which still have very limited provisions guaranteeing a basic income. The model used in Cyprus is a combination of the Anglo-Saxon and central European models; the Netherlands is positioned midway between

Scandinavia and central Europe. (For more details on this subject see Chapter 3 by Fortunato).

### **Social policy**

All European Union member states have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) in which they present their policies on the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The social inclusion of all citizens was a key objective of the Lisbon Strategy. Everyone must be able to participate in society and one of the key points of the European Council in Nice 2000 was to “act on behalf of the most vulnerable”.

The Netherlands continues the policy of promoting the combination of work and care tasks, and pays a good deal of attention to improving the availability, quality and affordability of childcare facilities. But new policy is increasingly showing signs of liberal characteristics. This is for instance illustrated by the privatisation of re- integration into the labour market, and the plans to abolish the distinction between private and compulsory state health insurance with a view to reducing the burden on collective resources and leaving more to market forces.

In Cyprus the basic objectives of governmental social services have been aiming at securing a minimum acceptable standard of living for all citizens, especially for those who do not participate, or who only participate to a limited extent, in the production process. The aim is also to attain a more equitable distribution of the national income and the tax burden, both between different income groups as well as regions. Furthermore, social services aim to implement as well as to improve existing social programmes while preparing for the introduction of new institutions, new programmes and schemes which will effectively respond to the expectation of those in real need.

## General objective

The objective of this study is to illuminate the effects of intensive aid on the self-reliance and independence of single mothers, and to show what is and what can be done to improve the empowerment of this group. Firstly the paper focuses on the effects of intensive social aid on the self-reliance and independence of single mothers, and how this affects the process of regaining social inclusion in each of the home countries. Secondly the results are compared with the second country, in respect of the socio-economic and cultural circumstances.

This study is based upon a comparative data collected from randomly selected single mothers in each country. In the Netherlands information was collected during in-depth interviews; in Cyprus semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used. The aim is to shed light on the issues that impact on the lives and the well-being of these mothers and their children in their social context.

This chapter presents sections of two large research projects which attempted to investigate the single-mother families from the woman's perspective, and it aims to analyse the following:

- Factors that hinder and improve the independent life of a single mother
- Choices that women make during the offered aid period and their motives
- The results of this change.

### Social exclusion and re-integration

Socially excluded people are those who are not allowed to belong, or are not able to belong, or are not willing to belong to society (Schuyt, 2002). Single mothers, as a group, are not excluded but they are at risk of becoming so when they have to face various sudden or unforeseen problems simultaneously. The situation can seriously compromise the balance between the woman's capacities and her daily responsibilities. A woman's competence to overcome this situation is influenced by protective factors, (e.g. self-esteem, resilience, autonomy, relatives, social network) and stress factors, (e.g., debt, homelessness, illness). Intensive aid intervention takes place so as to prevent further social exclusion. The re-integration into the labour market is also a means of preventing single mothers from isolation and exclusion. Their re-integration improves the chances of their children reaching their full potential too. Overall, the study is about the process of empowering single mothers and improving their level of independence, and asks whether intensive social aid empowers women enough to make their re-socialisation a success today and in the near future.

## Single mothers in the Netherlands

In Dutch research a one-parent family is identified as one in which one adult lives permanently with, and is responsible for, the upbringing of one or more young children. These families commonly result from the death of a partner, the collapse of a relationship or an extramarital birth (Plantenga, 1999). In 2001, there were 202,000 single parent households in the Netherlands of which 88 % were female. Out of these single parents 1% were between 16 – 24 years old, 90% were between 25 and 49 years, and another 9% were 50 years and older (Lehmann & Wirtz, 2004).

It used to be that a single parent living on social benefits could remain at home with their children until the youngest child reached the age of 12. However the Dutch government has introduced a new law (*Work Social Assistance Act* or *WSAA*, 2004) which has changed this situation. The current starting point is that every Dutch citizen is responsible for earning their own living and thus participates in the labour market. The *WSAA* makes an exception for single parents until the youngest child is 5 years old; single parents can stay on benefits until that point. To decrease the number of people on social security benefits, local governments have been authorized to create customised care. According to Buseman (2003) 20% of one-parent families obtain an income from paid employment. Another 20% get by with a combination of alimony payments and social security benefits. The rest barely manage with social security benefits. As well as having to face a crisis in her own marriage, the single mother is also confronted with a network crisis. Generally 40% of her contacts are broken.

Examples of the kind of intensive aid offered to single parents in the Netherlands and Cyprus are described below.

### **Intensive social aid by Xonar**

In 2001 the Dutch umbrella organisation Federatie Opvang calculated the capacity for all residential services for homeless women (and their children) as 1853 places (Trimbos-instituut, 2004). One of these services is Xonar vrouwen opvang en hulpverlening (Xonar) in Maastricht. It is a unique residential service which women with or without children can call upon for aid. The inter-related and often reinforcing problems of these women include physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychiatric problems, child rearing problems, limited independence and unwanted pregnancy. Only women with a serious drug or alcohol addiction, psychiatric illness or a severe mental handicap are ineligible for this aid. Together, the social work professional and the single mother set targets and develop an individual plan. They focus on the future, i.e., social integration and independence, and carry out what is realistic under the circumstances.

They aim to increase competences by:

- Learning new skills
- Reducing or extending tasks
- Reducing stress
- Activating or increasing protective factors

Part of Xonar's method involves a housing strategy, which is divided into three phases. Although there are certain house rules, the women can move about freely whilst caring for their children. Depending on the woman's developments (e.g., demonstrations of responsibility, education skills) she can move on to the next phase and finally to one of

Single mothers and the effects of intensive aid on the quality of their lives:  
The examples of The Netherlands and Cyprus

Xonar's equipped apartments. There the woman is fully responsible for herself and her child, her expenses, free time, the child's school or kindergarten, etc. Through the local housing corporation she can apply for a suitable house. The intensive aid programme ends here although a follow up programme is available if required.

## Single mothers in Cyprus

The *Public Assistance and Social Services Law 8/91 (1975)* defines single parents as individuals who are unwed mothers, widows or widowers, or whose spouse is in prison for over five years, is missing or who has been deported and has dependent children. However, the 2004 modification of the existing law has extended the category of 'single parent' to include individuals who are divorced or separated.

In Cyprus, the Department of Social Welfare Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance provides family support programmes which aim to alleviate/prevent the risks associated with social exclusion and poverty. Literature on women has demonstrated that female-headed households run a high risk of falling into poverty, and this is what needs to be avoided in Cyprus. Statistical information from recently conducted surveys in Cyprus (Varnavidou & Roussou, 2004), revealed that female households bear an unequal share of the burden of poverty compared with households headed by a man. Where households are headed by single mothers, the family will fall down to the poverty line if the mother becomes unemployed. It appears that a large number of women in this situation come from refugee backgrounds (due to the 1974 events in Cyprus), and so have little support from their extended families.

In terms of aid to single parents, the *Public Assistance and Services Law No 8/91* in Cyprus includes special provisions to support single parent families headed by single mothers. These provisions aim to promote human dignity and to help the family become independent of public funds. This includes the following:

- public assistance in the form of money and /or services may be granted to these women even when they are fully employed. The basic criterion for eligibility is that this type of family has inadequate resources for meeting its basic and special needs as determined by law.

Also, other measures to benefit women of this category include:

- improvement and expansion of childcare facilities,
- provision of special allowances for working people who keep dependent elderly parents at home,
- improvement of the vocational guidance and training system, and
- increase of the minimum untaxed income.

According to the Statistical Services of Cyprus, 378 single parents (as defined by the existing *Public Assistance and Social Services Law 8/91 (1975)*), and 437 divorced and separated parents received public assistance in 2003. This indicates that the percentage of single parent families is, at 4%, relatively low in Cyprus when compared with the rest of the European Union. 97% of these families are headed by women; the percentage of single unwed mothers is a mere 1% whereas single motherhood resulting from divorce adds up to 3 percent (*Loxandra Project, 2000*). As previously stated the Cypriot welfare system's provisions are limited to the support of unmarried mothers and widows. Currently the legislation does not consider divorced parents as single parents and thus any contribution is left to the discretion of the director of the Welfare Office.

### **Intensive social aid in Cyprus**

As far as the Cypriot situation is concerned, the absence of formal structured intensive aid programmes has resulted in the growth of a number of private programmes. These programmes have attempted to fill the gap in an effort to assist single parents, and in this case single mothers, in their struggle to become independent. The *Loxandra Project* (2000) identified needs connected with further education, vocational training and home-based businesses, and attempted to meet these needs with an intensive social aid project.

The *Project* was developed in order to improve the quality of vocational training for individuals who had been “disadvantaged” by socio-economic factors, and had the ultimate goal of increasing the women’s readiness to reintegrate into the community. These women were either unskilled or semi-skilled, and they had been striving to acquire necessary skills in order to become part of the productive labour market to combat their social and economic exclusion. Lastly, the *Project* was aiming to support single women during this transitional period of re-integration by providing them with continuous psychological support. The *Project’s* expectations of this training programme were used as a foundation for future independent services, as well as those to be developed in collaboration with job centres, prospective employers and training teams.

A group of twelve Cypriot single mothers was identified as being interested in the *Project*, and these women were trained for three months. A number of them were able to find jobs during the training period, and some immediately after the training period had ended. The project helped these women to re-integrate successfully and smoothly by giving them social and psychological support as well as by meeting their financial needs.

In the above sections, the position of single parents in The Netherlands and Cyprus has been outlined and an example of an aid project in each country has been considered. Now the chapter will examine the effects of such assistance.

## **Interviews: the key research instruments**

The use of interviews, (in-depth or semi-structured) has been very valuable for gathering the woman's experiences and personal reflections. A semi-chronological order was used to describe life stories: the present, the problematic past, the intensive aid period, and the future. The women were invited to tell their stories in their own way. The interview approach also provided the possibility of exploring additional research issues and, maybe more importantly, issues that moved the women during the interview.

Throughout the interviews, the interviewer's attitude was one of "active listening" so as to show understanding. ("Active listening" is a method of listening whereby you reflect back your understanding of what a person says to you. This is meant to confirm to them that you have understood their message, and to give them a chance to correct you if you have not. More importantly, however, this communicates your acceptance of the person's thoughts and emotions). The repetition of valuable story parts was also used to summarise and to review issues. During the entire interview process, it was important to show faith in the woman "telling the truth" and to accept her story unconditionally. This created a climate in which she could speak freely about behaviour, experiences and opinions.

### **The indicators**

The main research questions in the interviews were about whether intensive social aid empowers women to make integration a success, today and in the near future. Because the improvement of competencies have a direct impact on the ability to succeed at social integration, the interview questions and the subsequent presentation of results centre around the specific indicators used for determining social integration and competence-building namely:

- creating and maintaining living conditions
- handling and maintaining changes in family relationships
- creating a stable and stimulating education environment
- handling health and caring issues
- participating in networks (through labour, clubs)
- filling up free time
- building social networks (friends) and participating in them and handling new intimate relationships
- individual qualities (social skills, flexibility; education level, self-esteem)
- the individual's environment (relatives, friends, social network)
- stress factors (what is experienced as stressful).

## **The Dutch Case**

In order to draw up the effects of intensive aid on single mothers' self-reliance and independence, the experiences of single mothers had to be collected and analysed. Therefore it was decided to conduct qualitative research and to collect individual life stories by in-depth interviews. A life story is one's description of what one perceives to be the meaningful parts of one's life. (Izhar Oplatka 2001). In this study, the woman is asked to deliver her personal experience while the interviewer takes on the role of a potential listener. The story focuses on the problems faced at the moment when the woman decided to look for aid, and how that aid was located. It looks at the problem-diagnosis, the aid offered, the processes and outcomes; the final results, the life changes problem resolution, and the potential for independent living. The outcome of the interviews is not intended to be representative of single mothers in general.

### **Results of the Dutch interviews**

The women that participated in the Dutch interviews ranged from 17-38 years of age; they all had one child aged between 1-6 years. They all lived in rented accommodation and they all had different ethnic backgrounds. Most had fled from domestic violence or homelessness. Their first need was to find rest before rebuilding their lives, and in all cases, the discovery of other women in similar forms of distress was an important comforting factor. The women did not have formal employment nor did they receive financial support from their former partners. They received social benefits (*WVW* - *Wet Werk en Bijstand*) and family allowance. A private re-integration office was available to them, and offered them supervised workplace experiences in local companies.

### **Creating living conditions**

During the stay at Xonar, the women were satisfied with the personal mentor who supervised their development process. They were particularly pleased about being responsible for the execution of their own plan. It was an important form of empowerment. The older women were strongly motivated to become independent; they made quicker progress and had clearer perspectives for the future. The younger women struggled with this and were more reserved about the future. Having moved on from Xonar, the women are now able to create their own living conditions. They are satisfied with their new houses and with the move towards independent living. They are less satisfied with the uncertainties of the job training programme. Paradoxically, the women are hesitant about starting work yet they complain about the boredom of being at home.

### **Handling and maintaining changing family situations**

Women who had their own family lives prior to entering Xonar were able to care for their children from the start. Those who had a child right before or during the intervention period had to learn to do this. The provision of specific training on assertiveness, budget planning, mobility, hygiene, family law etc., helped most women to gain some independence. Some women also required trauma or behaviour therapy provided by an external professional institution. At the time of the interviews, the women's family situations were stable.

### **Creating a stable and stimulating education environment**

Over time, the women learned to become responsible for their own apartments, budgets and appointments. The organisation of sessions on relevant issues contributed to this

Single mothers and the effects of intensive aid on the quality of their lives:  
The examples of The Netherlands and Cyprus

learning. For example, 'good morning' sessions involved each woman informing the group of her plans and appointments for the day. The session taught the women how to structure a day, e.g. how to manage the baby's feeding schedule and arrangements with the lawyer or doctor. Another very useful type of session was the "thematic" session on subjects such as communication with the baby, child rearing issues, healthy eating habits, first aid, etc. Learning occurred as a result of the contents of the session as well as from the exchanges amongst the women/mothers themselves. Currently, the children's education is led by the mother and in some cases supported by day care or primary school.

### **Handling health care issues**

All the women follow the Dutch national child health protection plan. At this stage, the women and their children appear to be in good health even though some have a history with drugs.

### **Participation in networks (through labour, club, school)**

None of the women participate in these types of networks. Mostly, they stay at home.

### **Filling up free time**

Given the lack of formal employment, the women have a lot of free time and most of them find it hard to fill it. They lack friends with whom to socialise and to plan activities. Again, paradoxically they find being alone boring yet they hesitate to make new contacts. Much of their free time used to be spent with other Xonar woman and their children; some even became close friends. However, after Xonar, many of these women moved and this led to the loss of their contacts and increased their isolation.

### **Building up and participating in social networks (friends, relatives, etc)**

Most women find it very hard to build a new social network after losing the greater part of their old networks through divorce or as the result of moving to another city (for Xonar). Even more problematic is the situation of the ethnic minority women who have few friends and whose relatives are too far away to provide any support. These women find it particularly hard to trust life outside Xonar. Upon completion of Xonar's programme, the women are left to develop their new social networks independently.

### **Individual qualities and skills**

Motivation is a key quality when it comes to developing independence, and Xonar bases its work upon the women's individual qualities. The more mature women were quicker to realize the importance of becoming independent than were the younger women. In the group session on domestic violence, the older women were able to process past experiences and use these to develop new skills. In contrast, some of the younger women are still struggling today to combine their child rearing tasks and their own individual needs. In some cases, women had to learn to speak Dutch during their stay at Xonar and this proved to be an indispensable condition for independent living. Most of the women still lack the necessary skills to equip their new houses and they have no networks to call upon for assistance.

### **The individual's environment**

Entering the intensive aid period in Xonar was described as both a safe haven and a frightening step to take. Meeting single mothers with similar experiences was very encouraging for all. After Xonar, several of the women lost this supportive environment and they still hope to recuperate this loss through employment.

**Stress factors**

By taking the step towards the intensive aid programme, the women left most of their stress behind them. Some are still involved in juridical procedures for gaining custody of their children and creating visiting arrangements for the father. For others, ex-partners are still a distant threat. Once these arrangements have been made some women still fear the quality of the implementation of the agreements made, and ask for official child protection.

## The Cypriot Case

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the impact and the effects of intensive aid on single mothers' self-reliance and independence, the experiences of single mothers needed to be examined. The information depicted below is based on primary data collected during and after the training through questionnaires administered to all 12 women, and semi-structured interviews conducted with three of these women after the completion of the programme. Thus, quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. As with the Dutch case, this case looked at the problem, the aid offered, the process and its outcome (changes in lives, the resolution of certain problems, and the potential for independent living). However, as in the Dutch study, the outcomes of these interviews are not intended to be representative of single mothers in general.

### Results of the Cyprus project

The *Loxandra Project* seemed to be the first structured effort in Cyprus to deal with the needs of unemployed single parents, especially women. This was a structured attempt to support the population under study to enter the labour market and ultimately to improve their quality of life. The specific problem of unemployment amongst single parents who are mainly unskilled women highlights the inequalities that appear to exist between men and women. In Cyprus, as in most European countries, a large percentage of women are housewives, they are less educated and more financially dependent than men. As result, women generally have fewer opportunities in life than men. In all, 500 single parents (not as defined by the existing law because the sample included divorced and separated parents as well), were selected by the Snowball design (Aaker & Day, 1990). Of these, twelve single mothers agreed to participate, and they all completed the *Project*. These were single mothers, who were either divorced, separated, widows, or unmarried mothers, who responded to the needs assessment survey and who participated in the interview process. The survey was examining to what degree these families had financial, educational, social and psychological needs which had to be met before they could reintegrate successfully.

Findings from the reported data conclude that the predominant portrait of the single mother in Cyprus was that of a working mother with children and a low income. She was generally a high school graduate living in adequate housing, and she usually had custody of the children whilst bearing the heaviest financial burden for them. As reported, most of the single parent's income was spent on rent, and groceries, and less was spent on medical expenses, recreation and personal expenses. In line with findings from other European countries, and given the limited services and shortcomings of the legislation provided by the Cypriot state, the mother is the one who bears most of the financial burden for child rearing. A number of these women reported receiving financial support from their former partners; however they also added that they were very frequently in the courts due to long delays in alimony payments. Interestingly, most women also reported some type of financial help from their parents.

The participants were trained for a period of three months, and the curriculum included communication strategies, self development, assertiveness, hygiene, cooking, budgeting, marketing, and computer skills. The trainers were trained in advance in order to be aware of the needs of the specific group. Among them was a psychologist who not only served

as a trainer but who also responded to the numerous psychological needs of these women during and after the training process.

### **Living conditions of the participants**

Considering the general lifestyle of the Cypriot population, the satisfactory responses of the sample regarding their living conditions was not a surprise. The majority of the sample reported living in a house or an apartment of a satisfactory condition. However, some reported that heating was insufficient and this could be problematic because heating is of primary importance considering the very low winter temperatures in Cyprus, especially at night. These women felt that having their own space was a form of empowerment in that they could develop and live their lives with their children, independently. Taking into consideration the closeness of the Cypriot families and the fact that traditional extended families have not disappeared, it could be stated that some of these women had family members in close proximity, and this facilitated their living conditions.

### **Handling and maintaining changing family situations**

The main difficulties or reservations that the women expressed during and after the training process concerned the feeling that they had less time with their children, and occasionally they feared that they were neglecting them. However, in general they were very optimistic and believed that the training would ultimately help them to increase their incomes, and consequently their quality of life, independence and social facilitation. A small percentage of the women expressed the fear that they might not succeed in the programme, and some feared losing their allowance from the Department of Social Welfare Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance. However, the women generally felt that they were helped and motivated by the psychologist who provided psychological support and counselling during the transitional period.

### **Creating a stable and stimulating educational environment**

The educational training programme was intended to open new horizons for single parents who were in urgent need of becoming financially independent with new employment possibilities. These women had multiple needs, and the programme attempted to help gratify them through a designated curriculum. The programme was adjusted to reflect some of the constraints which affected the women's lives, such as the need for baby sitters or for transport arrangements. There were flexible teaching hours, and overall the *Project* was composed of courses which were more practical in nature with the emphasis on group activities, role-play and hands-on-experiences.

### **Handling health care issues**

Most of these women did not express any major health problems, although from the questionnaires it could be concluded that due to their financial difficulties, any health issues were given a low priority. Nevertheless most of these women and their children used the subsidized medical services offered by the Ministry of Health.

### **Participation in networks (through labour, club, or school)**

The women in the *Loxandra Project* did not participate in any formal type of network; however, they did express the need to belong to a group composed of people facing similar problems.

### **Filling up free time**

The responses indicate that the single women mainly felt deprived of money and time for themselves. These women did not express any need to fill in free time. They had all the

responsibilities of raising children alone, they were committed to financial, welfare and psychological support programmes, and consequently they had no time for themselves

### **Building up and participating in social networks (friends, relatives, etc)**

When the women of this study joined the *Project* they did not report any significant changes in the behaviour of the people in their immediate environment. However, they did emphasize that after their divorce many of them experienced a decline in living standards, in terms of both financial status and their social lives as a family. Yet most of them had good friends who supported both the mother and her children. In some cases, where the mother was of a low socio-economic and educational background, there were reports that the children felt some type of discrimination at school, and that they were generally socially excluded.

As far as the social conditions they experienced during and after the training, the greater majority of the sample felt that they had close friends who supported them and treated them with sympathy, love and understanding or at least they maintained the same attitude as before the training. It must be emphasized that in small communities such as those in Cyprus, families live in close proximity to each other. As a result, the immediate family such as parents and other close relatives support each other, at least financially, and in such a way they form the most common of social networks. This creates a dependency upon the people in the immediate environment. In our case the parents of the single mother helped as much as possible, however in some cases this kind of support can lead to parents exerting strong control over needy members of the family.

### **Individual qualities and skills**

Most women who expressed an interest in the *Project* wanted re-integration alongside professional assurance and an increase in income. Their ulterior motive was to ensure a better standard of living for their children. So these women were motivated enough to start and complete the project. Some felt that due to their family circumstances, which did not allow them to be properly employed, they did not possess the skills and capabilities required for a career and successful re-integration. This could imply a sense of low self-image, mainly as a result of the conditions they had to face. However they did express the need to belong to a group facing similar problems, worries and challenges.

### **The individual's environment**

The *Loxandra Project* attempted to promote equality of access to initial training for single mothers, and it also aimed to promote the acquisition of skills necessary to combat social exclusion. Being part of this *Project* made these women feel that they were given a special opportunity to develop as mothers and as women. They were also able to place a greater emphasis on the value of education and training. As these women developed close relationships with each other in the group, they felt safe and intrinsically motivated to continue. They felt more self confident, and as a result of constant support from the trainers, the psychologist and their peers they progressed successfully, each at their own pace, toward the completion of the project.

### **Stress factors**

One finding which concurs with the current research on single mothers is that the participants felt that their role as single mothers deprived them of certain 'rights' in life. For example, having no time for themselves due to too many responsibilities, and having no social life. These are some of the stresses that impact on the social and psychological development of these women. These were worked on during the *Project*. Other stresses

Single mothers and the effects of intensive aid on the quality of their lives:  
The examples of The Netherlands and Cyprus

concerned the relationship with the other parent. It was reported that although the relationship with the other parent was mostly average, the issue of alimony was causing them numerous problems. Also the absence or loss of a partner from the household produced a type of grief along with a range of feelings such as anger, fear, sadness and anxiety. These needed to be explored, managed and addressed during the *Project*. Other issues pertinent to single mothers included the presence, in very small percentages, of prejudice, sexual harassment, and avoidance by relatives. These are some of the additional stresses which needed to be considered and managed.

## Conclusions: The Dutch case and the Cypriot case

Some conclusions can be drawn about the effects of intensive social aid on the self-reliance and independence of single mothers as a way towards social inclusion. Examples of good practice have been identified in the aid provided by both the *Xonar* and the *Loxandra projects*. They appeared to have had a relatively strong impact on the woman's lives, although the aid was of temporary duration and so the women had to go on to manage independently. Overall, three key elements that appeared to 'make or break' the journey towards successful social inclusion included: self-empowerment, labour market re-integration and the re-building of social networks.

A significant contribution to the women's social inclusion was the development of self-empowerment, a regained responsibility for their own situations, increased self-esteem, increased awareness in terms of dealing with finances, application forms, government agencies, courts of law, etc. Although the participants' ideas for the future were rather vague and they hesitated to make concrete plans, these women were more accepting of their new situations and had tried to make the best of them. In the Dutch case the ethnic minority women, in particular, were actually more integrated into society after the intensive aid period. Learning to speak the Dutch language was a critical success factor.

Additionally, in the case of the Dutch women, the lack of a (strong) social network affected all but one single mother. The availability of a single friend or a family member was too small a basis from which to rebuild a new life, especially in a new city or environment. Some women were 'locked up' at home with their child for years, without friends to introduce them into the new environment, or a babysitter to allow them to socialise or work. However, unlike the Dutch case, the majority of the Cypriot women, due to the smallness of their communities, and their traditionally strong family ties, were rarely deprived of social support or social networks. Also, although the search for work could have led to employment and important (new) contacts for rebuilding a social network, few of these women, especially the Dutch ones, considered the search for a new job as a current option.

Re-integration into the labour market was necessary in order to gain independence and to play an active role in society. However, the women demonstrate little effort to find employment that would have released them from the social security system. In both cases, the small but reliable social benefit income was quite satisfactory. Their lack of initiative had them waiting for the private re-integration office to look for a job placement that could lead to employment. The Dutch mothers with very young children had not even considered contact with the re-integration office. In fact, most were reluctant to use childcare. It was striking that the element of time was of little relevance for these women and yet they felt burdened by boredom and loneliness. The effect of this in both countries was that they lost and wasted time which could have been used to educate themselves through schooling or labour market experiences. This loss weakened their future position on the labour market. A more creative use of the women's regained self-esteem, energy and motivation towards independence could have been used to fill the gap between the moment of departure from *Xonar* or *Loxandra*, and the moment of entry onto the labour market.

The departure from *Xonar* (including the social workers and the other single women), the lack of a strong social network and the lack of immediate employment opportunities ensured that the single mothers were still vulnerable even though their overall situation

Single mothers and the effects of intensive aid on the quality of their lives:  
The examples of The Netherlands and Cyprus

has improved. The 'vacuum' created after the departure from Xonar, created the potential for new threats like frustration, isolation, or even of developing 'wrong' new friends. For these reasons alone, some follow-up on the more vulnerable cases could prove very valuable for the women and for the investment made by Xonar.

In the Cypriot case, the completion of the intensive aid programme had made a significant contribution to the participants both psychologically, physically and cognitively. As these single mothers acquired skills and knowledge, they felt more educated and capable. As their self esteem and their concepts of themselves increased, so did their self reliance, self confidence, and thus their independence. The degree of readiness for re-integration into the community was increasing being built up at a slow but steady pace. The programme helped them to develop a social identity within a group, and this considerably helped them towards gratifying some of their need for belonging. The issue of gaining the necessary independence to become active participants in society was a factor that contributed a great deal towards re-integration into the different strata of society.

It is interesting to note that in Cyprus, due to the small (albeit increasing) number of single mothers and the greater homogeneity of the population, intensive aid programmes are limited. In addition, they are mainly concentrated in the private sector. In terms of the public sector, the Department of Social Welfare Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance limits aid as far as financial, social and psychological support is concerned. However we hope that there will be more developments in the future because we are now part of the European family.

The present chapter aimed to explore the circumstances surrounding the re-integration of single mothers who, according to the literature, urgently need to become financially independent and to create new employment opportunities. This chapter attempted to highlight that, despite the multiple cultural, religious, political and social differences between the two countries, single mothers faced comparable situations in each country. In both Cyprus and the Netherlands, single mothers faced similar worries, anxieties, skills, and basic stresses.

To conclude, it is clear that the particular problems and the circumstances of single mothers are similar in the Netherlands and Cyprus. As some of the needs were clearly addressed in this chapter such as emotional support, proper safe housing, affordable quality child care, and further educational and job skills training, the topic of single mothers is a major one. With the rapid changes in the family structures of many societies in recent years the issue of single parents needs further examination. Further social policies need to be introduced so as to focus on the creation of networks and the development of creative approaches in dealing with single mothers. Broadening the spectrum of services will give a voice to these women who often live in poverty and isolation, and will ultimately result in improving their quality of life.

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Single mothers and the effects of intensive aid on the quality of their lives:  
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