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VULNERABILITY OF LONE MOTHERS OVER THE LIVE COURSE IN SWITZERLAND

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the understanding of vulnerability of lone mothers in Switzerland. Vulnerability is a dynamic process along which individuals may experience falls and losses of resources, but through which they might also rise and gain empowerment as a consequence of coping and adaptation mechanisms. Vulnerability that originates within one specific life domain (e.g. family, employment, health) can then spill over to other life domains. Lone mothers and their children are often identified as vulnerable populations because of their overrepresentation among the poor and the less healthy compared to the general population. Yet, lone mothers are increasingly heterogeneous in terms of social background and resources, so that durations into and experiences of lone motherhood vary substantially. Such heterogeneity poses new challenges for defining the relative disadvantage of lone mothers and their families which we argue should have to be appraised through a multidimensional perspective. Drawing on a number of quantitative and qualitative data sources we first discuss the transition to lone parenthood and in which ways it is relevant to the analysis of multidimensional vulnerability for lone mothers in the Swiss context. Second, we refer to original empirical results on lone mothers' labour market participation over the last two decades by focussing on differences by age and educational level. Finally, we discuss various findings on the relationship between lone parenthood, employment, and health from our research project on lone mothers to highlight the conjunctures of disadvantages across life-course domains leading to vulnerability. Switzerland is an interesting case study, because of a welfare shaped around a two-parent and one main earner family model and a gendered unequal distribution of caring and financial responsibility within the family. Weak work-family reconciliation policies discourage mothers' full-time participation to the labour market. In such context particularly, the transition to lone motherhood might represent excessive strains for parents who have little choice but to take on alone both full care and financial responsibilities.

Keywords

lone mothers | vulnerability | education | life-course | employment | health

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1. Introduction

One-parent households are growing in number in many European countries. While widowhood was the privileged pathway to lone parenthood in the past (Kiernan, Land, & Lewis, 1998), marital break-ups are nowadays the primary cause for parents to raise children alone. During the last few decades, the increase in union instability and divorce rates across different social groups (defined, for example, according to age and education) has fostered greater heterogeneity among the population of men and women who live alone with one or more children below age 18 (or 25 depending on the definition). Such changes in the population of lone parents have been accompanied by more frequent and faster transitions out of lone parenthood through re-partnering and the formation of blended and step-families (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; for the Swiss case see Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016b).

On the one hand, changes in union dynamics and the heterogeneity of the one parent households may reduce the relative disadvantage to which one-parent households are exposed to or the duration of such exposure. On the other hand, data show that lone parenthood is still highly correlated to disadvantage in different domains: for example, lone parents are over-represented in the population below the poverty threshold (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Letablier, 2011; López Vilaplana, 2013), and among those suffering from worse health (Cullati, 2014; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Struffolino, Bernardi, & Voorpostel, 2016). This poses the question of whether changes in lone parents' characteristics introduce further social inequalities within the population of lone parents. Such inequalities depend on both the kind and the amount of resources available to parents during and after the transition to lone parenthood: economic, relational, and emotional resources of parents and children might be indeed endangered by this life course transition (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003; de Regt, Mortelmans, & Marynissen, 2013).

Such dynamics in the individual family experience can be read through the theoretical perspective of life course (Elder, 1994; Mayer, 2009) according to which “the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in choice making” (Elder, 1994: 5). More specifically, within this framework family is conceived as a “collection of individuals with shared history who interact within ever-changing social contexts across ever increasing time and space” (Bengston & Allen, 1993:470). The crucial point in these definitions is that the timing and the sequence of family events may change depending on the historical context—defined for example by the welfare state—and have effects in other domains and on other individual life course. As a consequence, the changes in available resources of different kinds occurring with the

transition to lone motherhood can trigger spill-over effects in other life domains for both mothers and their children and become sources of vulnerability.

Vulnerability is an ideograph that has political relevance—like other concepts such as equality, security, and freedom—but is often ill-defined (McGee, 1980). In this paper, we understand vulnerability as a weakening process because of the lack of resources in one or more life domains that i) exposes individuals to negative consequences related to such a reduction in resources; ii) makes them unable to cope effectively with stressors and life course hazards; iii) makes them unable to recover from resource losses or to take advantage of recovering opportunities when they occur (Spini, Bernardi, & Oris, forthcoming). Such a definition is *multidimensional* because resources, stressors, and critical hazards may diffuse across life domains (family, employment, health, and sociability); it is *multidirectional*, because vulnerability, is dynamically conceived as a process of rise and fall during which individual and groups may pass through vulnerable phases and recover finding ways to overcome them by optimizing the resources they have (Spini, Hanappi, Bernardi, Oris, & Bickel, 2013).

So far, research on lone parents has most often focused on mono-dimensional interpretations of vulnerability. However, because of changes in the composition of the lone-parents population such vulnerability is not given for all lone parents and it has to be measured by referring to a multidimensional perspective. Vulnerability could be indeed the consequence of a combination of income, time, psychological or relational strain: for example, poorer human and social capital (correlated to low educational level), experiencing lone parenthood at an early age, as well as low degrees of institutional support and limited generosity of the welfare system are likely to increase the exposure to vulnerability. Furthermore, in contexts of considerable levels of gender inequality in the labour market, mothers might face greater difficulties compared to fathers when they experience lone parenthood: taking on the role of main earner while having on average lower earnings, more complex employment histories, and poorer employment and career opportunities than men might become sources of additional disadvantage. This is likely to be especially so if work-family reconciliation policies are insufficient and not generous. Because the great majority of lone parents continue to be women (European Commission, 2014), the transition to lone motherhood is particularly critical for mothers.

In this paper, we consider some aspects of lone mothers' experience in different life domains that trigger vulnerability in the Swiss context. We draw on a number of quantitative

and qualitative data sources: we present new empirical evidence as well as we depict a broad overview from our previous work. Switzerland is an interesting case-study because low levels of welfare support for parents (OFS, 2015) go hand in hand with a highly gendered division of labour, a high share of part-time employment among women, and a high gender pay gap (Bütler & Ruesch, 2007; Stutz & Knupfer, 2012). The next section presents some stylized facts on the context by detailing the characteristics of lone-parent households and the social policies influencing family welfare. In Section 3 we discuss the transition to lone parenthood and in which ways it is relevant to the analysis of vulnerability for lone mothers in the context of the Swiss welfare state. Section 4 provides an outlook of the development of lone mothers' engagement in paid work over time, focussing on differences by age and educational level. Further, we discuss various findings on the relationship between lone parenthood, employment, and health to highlight the conjunctures of disadvantages across life-course domains leading to vulnerability.

2. Lone parenthood in Switzerland: stylized facts

In this Section we present some relevant stylized facts on lone parenthood in Switzerland by referring to the discrepancy between actual need of such family form and welfare policy.

In 2012 one-parent households represented 15% of households with at least one child below the age of 25 (OFS, 2013). The great majority of the households were formed by “intact” families (children living with both biological parents). Data from Family and Generation Survey (FGS) show that women between 15 and 54 years old living without a partner and with at least one child of their own below age 18 accounted for 6% of the total survey sample in 2013 (Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016b). However, the number of women who have been lone parents at some point in their life is higher. Family formation histories confirm that 13% of women in the sample had experienced lone parenthood at least once between 1953 and 2013. As a consequence, in 2012, recomposed families (married or cohabiting couples) represent the 6% of the households with at least one child below the age of 25.

The large majority of lone parents are women (89% in 2000, cf. Bühler, 2002). As lone mothers they face the challenge of having to work more to increase their disposable income (being sole breadwinner), but also to continue devoting time to care for children (being primary care-givers). The poverty risk of lone mothers seems to be driven by the combination of institutional arrangements in the labour market, the gender regime, and the welfare state

(Burstrom et al., 2010, Brady & Burroway, 2012, Branger, Gazareth, & Schön-Bühlmann, 2003; Flückiger, 1998). In countries where women's access to (full-time) paid work is low and/or the gender pay gap is high, lone mothers are particularly disadvantaged, as there is no male partner in the household to level off the financial deficit. On the other hand, the absence of public child-care and or a gendered eligibility for social benefits aggravate lone mothers' poverty risk. The Swiss case looks similar to the German one (OFS, 2013), where lone mothers' poverty risk is three times higher than that of the overall population, (Hübgen, forthcoming). Lone parent households' income is far lower than other households' income, with the exception of people +65 living alone.

Within the life-course perspective, how specific institutional configurations of the welfare “do gender” (Krüger & Levy, 2001; Levy & Widmer, 2013) sheds light on the potential exposure to vulnerability in specific life domains. In Switzerland, public policies targeting work-family reconciliation are poor compared to those in other Western welfare states (Monnier, 2006): expensive public childcare and marriage-based taxation discourage women's labour force participation (Bütler & Ruesch, 2007; Boeckmann, Misra, & Budig, 2015). Furthermore, despite the recent introduction of full-day schools, most schools time schedules are hardly compatible with those of parents who work. It follows that, despite the dramatic increase in the use of extra family day care in the last decades, one parent out of two still cannot afford a full-time solution. This welfare arrangement is based on the one-and-a-half-earner model in which men work full-time while women who become mothers adjust their working hours due to care obligations (Giraud & Lucas, 2009).

Such a combination leads to a high incompatibility between the work and family spheres and a high share of maternal part-time work (OFS, 2013). In Switzerland women's presence in the labour market is very high compared to other European countries, but full-time female employment rates are very low (Bühlmann, Schmid Botkine, Farago, Hopflinger, & et al., 2012). The substantial gender pay gaps and given the relatively widespread and universal social policy schemes against poverty (Armingeon, Bertozzi, & Bonoli, 2004) and the generous unemployment protection (Gebel, 2013), different cost-opportunity structures are open to lone parents depending on their individual and family characteristics.

3. Becoming a lone parent: objective and subjective transitions

This section discusses the relationship between the concept of non-normativity of the transition to lone parenthood and vulnerability.

The non-normativity of the lone parent status with respect to social and individual expectations about parenthood might create a unfavourable societal environment that can increase the exposure of lone parents to vulnerability. Moreover, a mismatch can exist between the objective definition of lone parenthood based on administrative and statistical criteria and the subjective perception of lone parenthood by individuals experiencing it. We explore this dimensions of the transition to lone parenthood by reporting the findings from a recent qualitative longitudinal study based on in-depth interviews with lone mothers in French-speaking Switzerland (Bernardi & Larenza, forthcoming).

Firstly, defining lone parenthood as a non-normative way of “doing family” and being parents refers to the statistical dimension: lone parenthood concerns a minority (even if a growing one) of parents. In addition, lone parenthood is non-normative with respect to norms and values attached to parenthood that stigmatize to different extent family living arrangements different from the one in which two-parents cohabit with their child(ren). Moreover, the non-normativity of lone parenthood can be also seen from the individual’s own life perspective. Lone parenthood is often an unexpected and unintended consequence of a critical event, such as union disruption or it results—more rarely nowadays in most rich Western democracies—from an unintended pregnancy or from widowhood. Unexpected transitions may generate turning points as well as more or less temporary disruptions in the life course, and therefore require some efforts for recovering and adaptation. Finally, lone parenthood is non-normative with respect to institutional regulations of the life course: although the increasing de-standardisation of the life courses brings about a related relaxation of informal norms about family pathways (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Hägestad, 1996), in most countries the social and legal institutions regulating work and family are designed to meet the needs of two-parent families (Bernardi, Larenza, & Mortelmans, forthcoming). The fact that lone parents deviate from institutional expectations (Phelps, Furstenberg, & Colby, 2002) and often unintendedly so, often oblige them to draw heavily on their time, financial, and health resources.

This multifaceted understanding of non-normativity of lone parenthood highlights the mechanisms through which individuals are exposed to vulnerability when their family pathway/experience is not fully coherent with the institutional setting and the social norms and expectations. Lone parents’ specific needs may be for example disregarded by social and

institutional actors and an extra individual effort of adaptation is required. Similarly, lone parents may make proof of extra (self-)regulation skills to fit in the socially-shared understanding of parenthood or to redefine and defend their own.

Within this framework, the timing of occurrence of lone parenthood in the life course as well as the way the transition occurs both matter for the extent to which lone parents may be vulnerable. First, depending on the age at which lone parenthood is experienced, individuals are more or less likely of having cumulated sufficient human and social capital to face such critical transition. This is crucial because both dimensions are associated with different amount of material and relational resources available to the household: for example, higher educated lone parents have better chances to be employed, to earn more, to be in “good jobs” (Begall & Mills, 2011) as well as to negotiate their employment conditions, and therefore to have, for example, the opportunity to work flexible hours and to delegate tasks (Hochschild & Manchung, 1989).

Second, the way lone parenthood occurs may define the amount, the sources, and the condition of social support individuals may be count on after the transition. In the past, legal regulations and social blame treated differently widows and divorced mothers (Lewis, 1998; Martin & Millar, 2003). Nowadays, while such differences are rapidly being cancelled, post-transition arrangements with the non-resident parent (children custody, parental authority, and children alimony) and the requisites for institutional support to lone parents and their children have become fundamental to provide resources and trigger stresses related to the transition to lone parenthood.

While timing and the pathways to lone parenthood are related to resources, an additional strain derives from the separation process: in fact, a period of uncertainty around the relational status of all individuals involved creates often ambivalent situations. Moreover, under this perspective the precise point at which lone parenthood begins is hard to identify univocally. Lone parenthood can originate from objective events (residential separation of parents, regulation of authority and economic responsibility for the child) or from more subjectively defined conditions (feeling of having the major responsibility for a child, degree of involvement of the non-resident parent). These subjective criteria to define the starting point of lone parenthood are much less certain and unequivocal and such ambiguity could be a source of vulnerability if, for example, lone parents’ life (e.g. employment) and that of their children (e.g. residence) cannot be easily re-arranged.

The longitudinal semi-structured interviews carried out with 40 lone mothers in 2012 and 2014-5 in French speaking Switzerland explored these dimensions of lone parenthood. The aim was to collect information on the daily-life adjustments concerning labour market participation child-care, welfare support, and lone parents' relationship life (Larenza & Bernardi, 2016).

The analysis of the interviews shows that lone mothers' attachment to the labour market differs by individual and household characteristics (see also Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016), but also by the degree of uncertainty in the organization of care following lone parenthood. Such uncertainty was indicated by the interviewees as affecting the organization of working time. On the contrary, if the changes in the family structure occurred in a relatively short time and satisfactory arrangements were found, the transition to lone parenthood would not produce vulnerability, understood as a durable state of insufficient resources. Yet, lone parents often lamented the lengthy legal proceedings and non-reliability of the care arrangements, which limited their ability to take on commitments (e.g. work-related). Work-care balance sometimes requires adaptation of children's time (see also Millar & Ridge, 2013) and it challenges lone parents' economic and psychological well-being well after the uncertain transition phase.

Second, the empirical findings show that indeed the subjective experience of the transition to lone parenthood is often non-linear and marked by the ambiguity related to whether the lone parent is the only carer for the child(ren) and the ambivalence connected to the acceptance of such a role. Lone parents asked to describe the transition to lone parenthood reported a number of equally important objective and subjective markers to time it. Objective markers were the couple's residential separation (moving out of one partner or the establishment of two new separate households) or the legal arrangements defining the non-resident parent's visiting rights and the financial responsibilities of both parents. Subjective markers were more related to the way in which caring and responsibilities were informally shared between parents, sometimes even before their legal or residential separation had occurred. Subjective markers were often indicated by the interviewees as turning points in their parental responsibilities and were an important part of their self-definition as lone parents.

4. Is employment a source of vulnerability or rather an opportunity for lone mothers? Heterogeneity across social groups.

In this Section we present three empirical works focussing on the link between the experience of lone parenthood and the engagement in paid work. This aspect is crucial for the understanding of the emergence of vulnerability for individuals who might experience an exacerbation of work-family reconciliation issues after the transition to lone parenthood. Taking for granted that engagement in the labour market is the result of opportunities and constraints, on the one hand paid work does not always represent an effective way out of poverty (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Ritakallio & Bradshaw, 2006), but on the other hand welfare dependency is one of the major concerns in the socio-political debate about lone parents (Haux, 2011; Lewis, 1997). Therefore, looking at labour market participation of lone mothers shed light on the processes of potential vulnerabilization of those mothers who have to provide sufficient resources for the household through employment without neglecting caregiving.

The interplay between household structure and employment is very relevant to the Swiss case, because of the little employment protection provided, which lies below the OECD average (OECD, 2013). Moreover, in Switzerland, the unemployment insurance is based on individual contributions and benefits. Therefore, working mothers—who are more likely than men to hold unstable, part-time, and low-paid jobs—are particularly penalized unless they can count on their partners' income and security (Stutz & Knupfer, 2012). However, as mentioned above, the welfare state guarantees relatively high levels of social protection rights (Bertozzi, Bonoli, & Gay-des-Combes, 2005). This might discourage mothers with unfavourable labour market prospects from taking up paid work. Welfare dependency may appear a good strategy in the short run to optimize scarce economic and time resources. However, staying out of the labour market can bring a number of negative consequences in the long run (depreciation of both social capital and skills) that in turn undermines future employability prospects. This might be particularly harmful for lower-educated lone mothers. Given that being unemployed or on welfare assistance is negatively associated with outcomes in different domains such as health (Cullati, 2014; Struffolino et al., 2016), the interplay of employment and individual socio-demographic characteristics may trigger the emergence of multiple disadvantages for lone mothers.

4.1 Patterns of engagement in paid work over time: a comparison across household types

The first empirical work is based on original analyses on a number of dimensions of labour market participation of women in different living arrangements: we contrast lone mothers (i.e. those living alone with at least one children younger than 18) to mothers living in a couple (with at least one children younger than 18) and to women living in a couple without children. To this purpose, we selected a subsample of individuals from the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLSF) aged 15 to 54 (waves 1991 to 2013). The SLSF is a representative cross-sectional survey that collects information about several aspects related to labour market participation and individual and household characteristics¹. Our final sample consists of 149,047 women survey between 1991 and 2013 (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix for the distribution of the sample by year of the survey), among whom 7 to approximately 11% were lone mothers, 58 to 66% were mother in couples and 25 to 34% women in couple.

We first consider if and how the employment rate by age group has changed over the last two decades for women in general, for mothers in couple and for lone mothers. Participation in paid work differ substantially by household structure (Figure 1): while lone mothers and women in couple have high and stable over time participation rates (around 80%), mothers in couple have lower employment rates, even if they increased over time. No differences by age in employment trends can be detected, but age matters differently for the three groups of women: no difference among lone mothers, higher rates as age increases for mothers in couples, and rather convergent trend over time for women in couples. The size of group of younger lone mothers (age 15 to 30) is small and includes women who are still in education or who are likely to get further education while being lone mothers: this might explain the idiosyncratic trend in the participation rate of this sub-group compared to older lone mothers’.

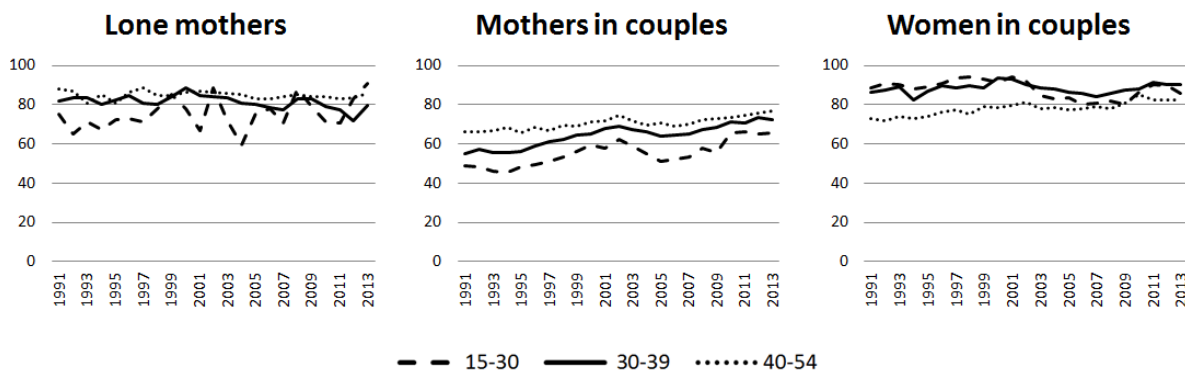


Figure 1: Employment rate for lone mothers, mothers in couple, and women in couple by age group, 1991-2013.

Source: *Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS)*. Authors' calculations. Lone mothers N=11,653, mothers in couple N=94,922, women in couple N=42,472.

The processes leading to lone parenthood are likely to vary according to women's education level (Kiernan et al., 1998), which is one of the resource that may prevent them from becoming vulnerable or to remain vulnerable for extended periods of time. The difference in education between lone mothers and mothers living in couples was larger in the past (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007). The major reason behind such change is the normalization and the raise in prevalence of divorces and separations across educational level (Matysiak, Styrce, & Vignoli, 2014). As highlighted above, human capital is likely to represent a moderator for the exposure to the risk of vulnerability when individuals experience lone parenthood. Because highly educated women show a stronger labour force attachment (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013) and higher quality employment (Hanappi et al., 2016), they also have better resources to turn to in order to meet work-care potential conflicts. Holding better-paid jobs allow for externalizing childcare, while stronger bargaining power with employers allow for flexible working hours arrangements (e.g. Begall & Mills, 2011). On the contrary, less skilled women have a much narrower range of available options to cope with the increase in demand of income and care they experience when the transition to lone parenthood occurs. They are more prone to fully rely on welfare or to drop out of employment, while having less access to social support (Ross & Mirowsky, 2010). When being in low-paid and temporary jobs, this does not ward off poverty nor foster further spendable qualification as time goes by.

We consider how the population of lone mothers evolved over time looking at the highest education level attained, being the latter positively associated with participation to the labour market. Tracing the effect of the general education expansion (Shavit et al., 2007), an

increasing number of women experiencing lone motherhood have tertiary degree (almost 20% in 2013, see Figure 2).

Figure 3 compares lone mothers to the other two groups of women with respect to employment rates by educational group. The gap in the employment rate between highly and lower educated is particularly wide for lone mothers and women in couples. Among lone mothers this difference has increased over time: lower secondary educated women’s employment rates are approximately 10% lower than tertiary educated women’s rates during the 2000s. For mothers in couple the trend of increasing participation seems to be occurred especially to medium educated, but the differences between educational groups are overall smaller compared to lone mothers and women in couples.

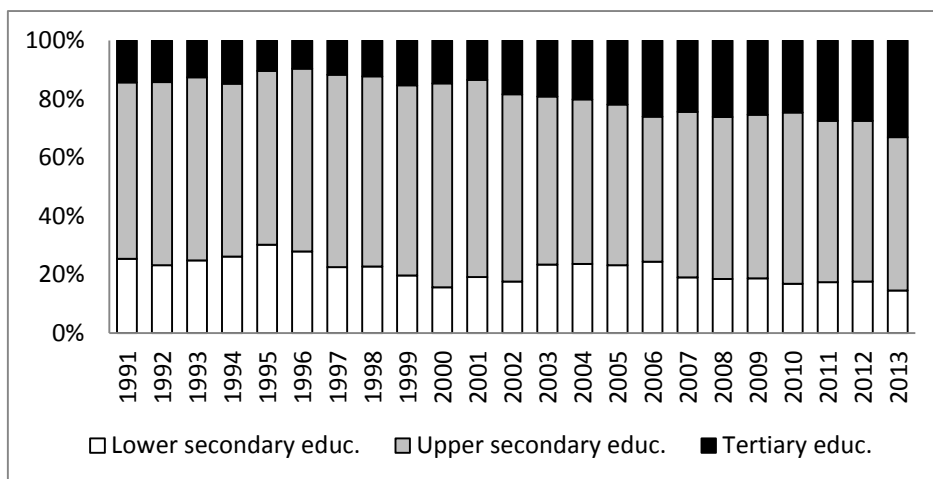


Figure 2: Distribution of lone mothers by educational level, 1991-2013.

Source: Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS). Authors’ calculations. Lone mothers N=11,653.

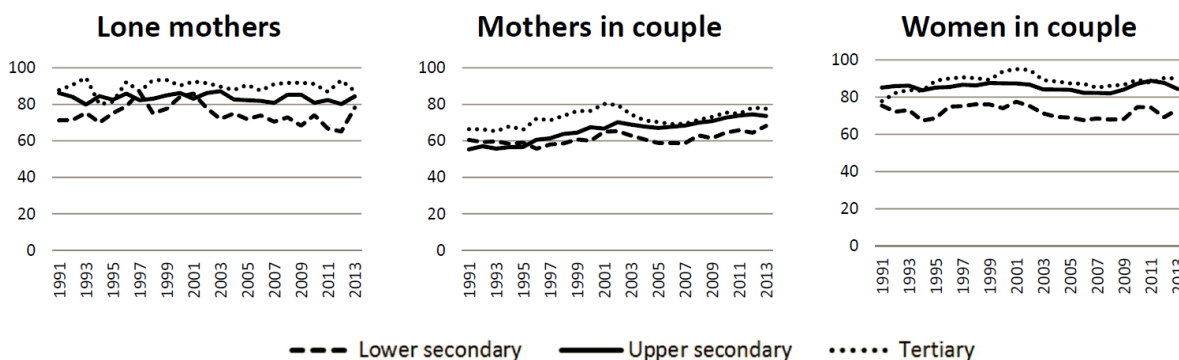


Figure 3: Employment rates for lone mothers, mothers in couple, and women in couples by educational level, 1991-2013.

Source: Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS). Authors’ calculations. Lone mothers N=11,653, mothers in couple N=94,922, women in couple N=42,472.

Because of the concerns about lone mothers' welfare dependency, many governments put much effort in designing welfare-to-work measures² to encourage labour market participation and – ideally – foster economic independence of one-parent households. Indeed, flexible and reduced working-hours arrangement can represent a valuable support for reconciliation. Yet the number of hours worked are also an indicator of the kind of strategy lone mothers employ to face the “need-for-work/income” trade-off. Figure 4 shows that lone mothers work longer working-hours compared to mothers in couples, being mostly engaged in long-part-time or full-time jobs while mothers in couple are more likely to be out of the labour market or to have longer (50-89% of a 39-hour working week) and shorter part-time jobs (less than 50%). We interpret such finding as an indication of lone mothers' high need to work to make ends meet.

Working full-time does not represent a source of disadvantage in itself, given that a strong engagement in the labour market associates with positive outcomes such as better health for specific groups of lone mothers. When focusing on trends over time, mothers in couples have increased their engagement in long part-time employment (50-89%) of about 10-15% between 1990 and 2013, and conversely decreased short part-time work and inactivity rates. The patterns for lone mothers are fairly different: in fact, lone mothers are increasingly more engaged in short part-time jobs (<50%, from 30 to about 40%) and less involved in full-time jobs (from 40 to 25%). This trend can be driven by different processes. On the one hand, it can indicate that lone mothers are relying more often on welfare support and partially give up full-time jobs (see e.g. Boeckmann et al., 2015; Fok, Jeon, & Wilkins, 2012; Misra, Budig, & Boeckmann, 2011). On the other hand, the need for additional income might be moderated by increasing economic support from fathers (given the changing nature of lone parenthood arising more frequently from separation and divorce than from single motherhood and widowhood).

The fact that mothers in couple work less hours than women in couple and lone mothers might speak against the historically rooted rhetorical argument of welfare dependency of lone mothers (see e.g. Asen, 2003). However, it should be noticed that in contexts where part-time jobs are poorly paid and unemployment benefits are generous, individuals who need to work part-time to reconcile work and family can be more likely to rely on welfare. In Switzerland well-paid part-time jobs seem to foster lone mothers' labour market participation despite unemployment benefits' generosity. This is can be highly relevant for lone mothers' employment perspective in the long run, given that evidence exists

on that for lone mothers working part-time is positively associated with the probability of moving to full-time jobs in the long run (see e.g. Fok, Jeon, & Wilkins, 2012).

To further account for heterogeneity in labour market participation and the consequent exposure to vulnerability due to increasing burden, Figure 5 shows a finer working-hours classification for lone mothers by educational level. Highly educated lone mothers are engaged in very little short part-time and they are—not surprisingly—less likely to be inactive compared to less educated ones. This configuration does not change significantly over time, with the exception of an increasing rate of inactivity for lone mothers with a lower secondary degree. Interestingly enough, the latter are also those more engaged in what can be considered full-time jobs (90-100%). A possible interpretation of this polarization among low educated lone mothers is that they are both more likely either to have had to choose a stronger engagement in paid work to secure a sufficient family income or to step back from work and rely on welfare to fully provide for care within the household. In contrast, holding a higher educational degree can more easily result in stronger reluctance to ask for social help that pairs with stronger labour market attachment and a stronger bargaining power to temporarily re-arrange one’s own working hours. What Figure 5 also reveals, it is that this overall configuration by education has not changed significantly during the last 20 years.

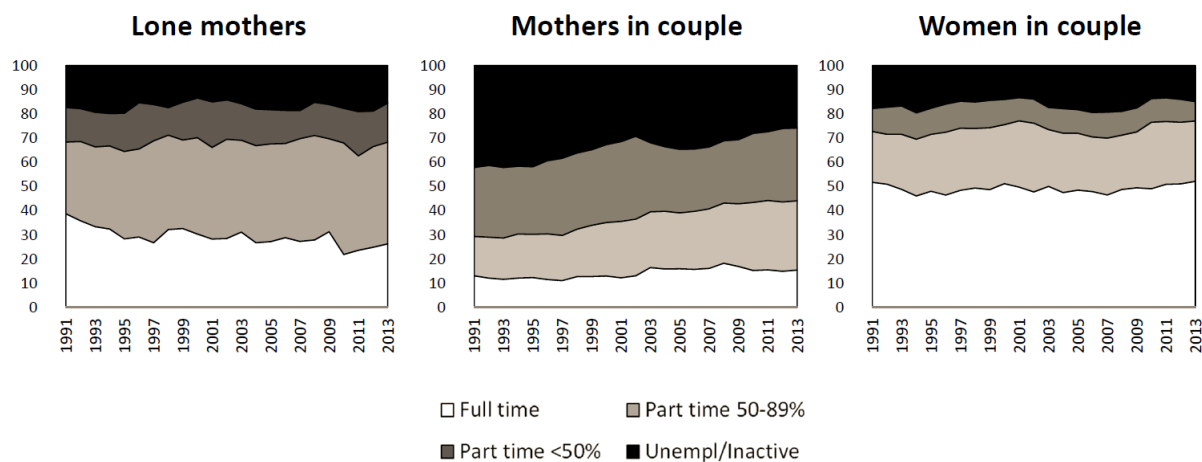


Figure 4: Employment rate for lone mothers, mothers in couple, and women in couple by working-hour arrangement, 1991-2013.

Source: Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS). Authors’ calculations. Lone mothers N=11,653, mothers in couple N=94,922, women in couple N=42,472.

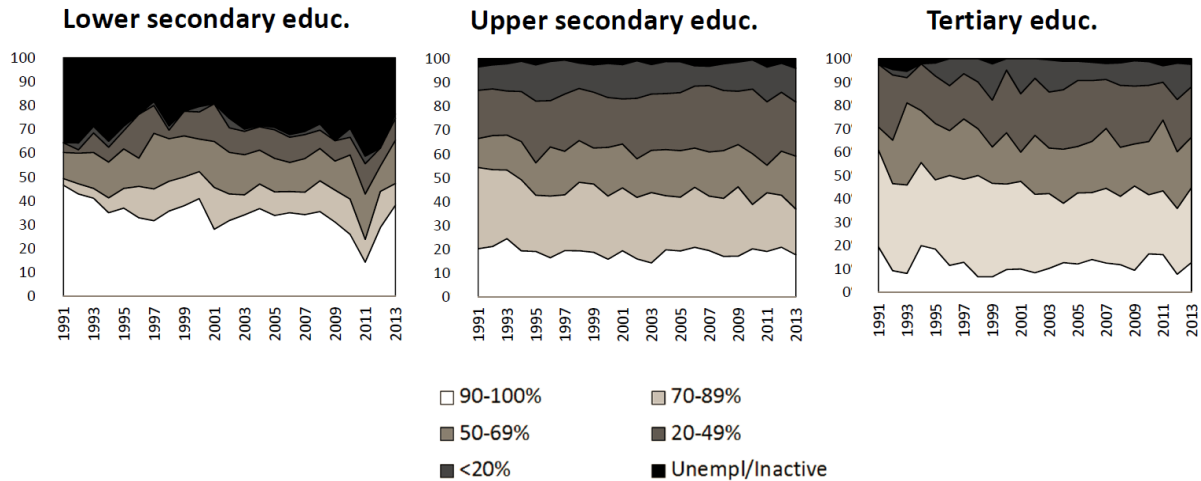


Figure 5: Employment rate for lone mothers according to educational level and working-hours arrangement, 1991-2013.

Source: Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS). Authors' calculations. Lone mothers N=11,653.

4.2 Pathways of labour market participation before and after the transition to lone motherhood: a longitudinal mixed-method approach

The second empirical contribution focuses on how individual socio-demographic characteristics and household composition are associated with the probability for women to experience certain pathways of labour market participation after the transition to lone parenthood. When this transition occurs, in most cases women need to ensure enough financial and care supplies. In a life course perspective, it is crucial to consider which individual and household characteristics affect lone mothers' decisions on their engagement in paid work around this turning point.

Previous research has indeed shown that the labour market participation of lone parents is at risk in two ways (Haux, 2011). First, when lone parenthood occurs early in the life course, individuals may be excluded from the labour market due to their low level of qualifications, and they are often funnelled in a spiral of cumulative disadvantages across life domains beyond employment (Jaehrling et al., 2012). Second, if lone motherhood occurs when children are in preschool ages, employment may be hard to reconcile with the high care demand (Collins et al., 2006). The choice of assuming the double role of main breadwinner and main carer by working full-time and externalise care for the children requires that lone mothers have some attractiveness for the labour market (employability). However, full employment may reduce their functioning due to overloads and multiple responsibilities. Lone mothers who privilege their care-givers' role and either withdraw or substantively

reduce their presence on the labour market by relying on welfare support might experience negative feelings of dependence, social stigmatization, and lower chances to reintegrate the labour market subsequently (e.g. Gingerbread Report, 2012).

We draw from our previous research on the Swiss case to analyse the heterogeneity of employment trajectories among lone mothers around the transitions to lone parenthood (Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016a). We used data from the biographical calendar of the Swiss Household Panel, a longitudinal panel survey that in 2001 and 2013 collected additional retrospective information on several dimensions of the life course on a nationally representative sample of the Swiss population³ (N 2001=6,601; N 2013=6,090). We selected a subsample of women who: i) experienced the transition to lone parenthood (through separation/divorce, widowhood, and lone parenthood at first birth) before the age of 54, and ii) live in the same household with at least one of kids younger than 18. Our final sample was composed by 591 individuals.

Because of our interest in tracing the longitudinal employment trajectories we referred to sequence analysis (Abbott, 1995; Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010). This family of methods conceptualizes change as a process that occurs over time, and therefore privileges the analysis of trajectories of events as a whole. Such trajectories are operationalised as sequences of categorical states or events rather than of single transitions between different statuses. To apply this methodological framework, we used retrospective information from the life history calendars to reconstructed sequences of individual employment trajectories over 10 years (2 years before and 8 after the transition to lone parenthood). By clustering the resulting sequences according to their similarity (Andrew Abbott & Forrest, 1986; Studer & Ritschard, 2016) in terms of employment statuses experienced at each of the 10 years considered, as well as their sequencing and timing, we identified typical pathways of labour market participation. We then assessed the probability of experiencing each pathway associated with socio-demographic and household characteristics by estimating a multinomial logistic regression and computing marginal effects for each relevant variable. By following a mixed-method approach, we finally integrated the evidence we obtained with the qualitative information collected on 49 lone mothers to highlight rationales and expectations accounting for different labour market behaviour (Bernardi & Larenza, forthcoming; LIVES, 2016).

Figure 6 displays the clusters representing the typical employment pathways around the occurrence of lone parenthood. The employment pathways differ in terms of attachment to the labour market. The results from the multinomial logistic model that estimates the

probability of following the five pathways by specific relevant individual and household characteristics show, firstly, that younger age at lone parenthood and higher educational level are associated to stronger engagement in paid work or at least into recovering employment after lone parenthood. More in details, women who were younger at the moment of the transition to lone motherhood or hold a least an upper secondary educational degree are more likely to continue being employed as before the transition (in part-time or full-time work) or to increase their working time after lone parenthood occurred.

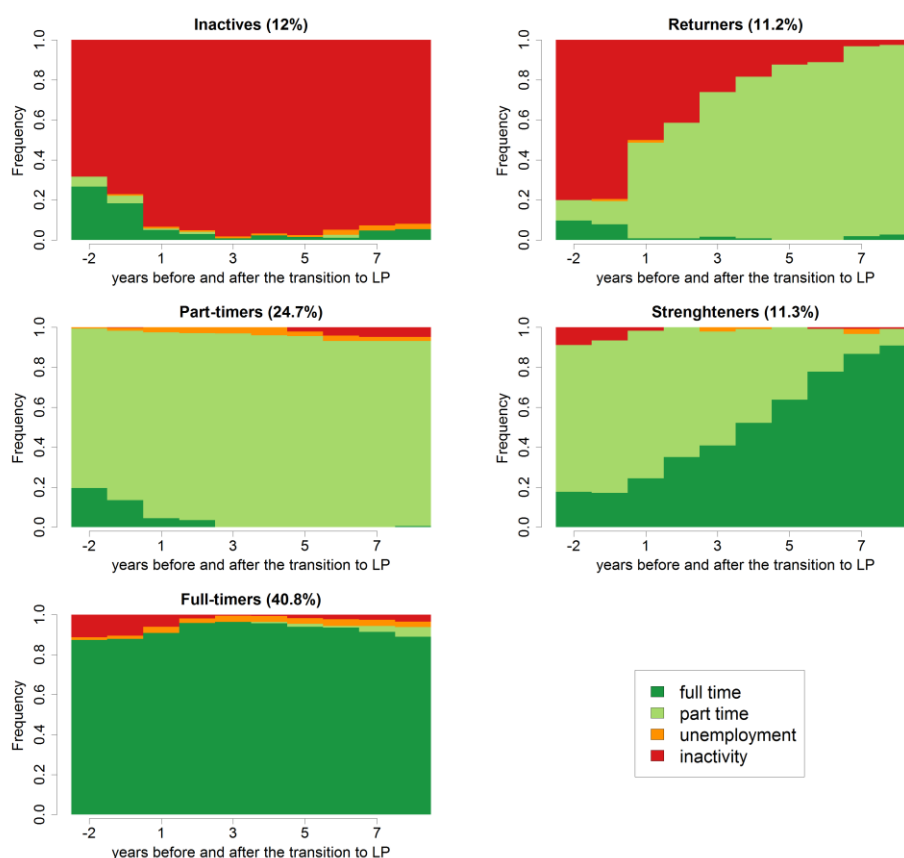


Figure 6: Typical employment pathways before and after lone parenthood occurred.

Source: Swiss Household Panel (SHP), biographical calendar 2001 and 2013, N=591.

These findings are consistent with those showing the returns to investments in human capital, that—as recalled above—constitute an effective means to keep employment: for example, prestigious or in general “good” jobs can drive higher flexibility in organizing the working time and therefore more resources to combine work and family (Begall & Mills, 2011; Hochschild & Manchung, 1989; Voydanoff, 2005). The qualitative interviews show

that mothers with tertiary education are motivated to work, are better able to negotiate employment conditions in such a way that they can meet temporary emergencies. It occurs that, during particularly critical life course transitions (due to illnesses or employment interruptions) high educated mothers temporarily depend on welfare support.

The interviews show that under such circumstances higher educated mothers are better equipped to evaluate in their long-run potential consequences the professional advices provided by the welfare institutions officers. These lone mothers, for instance, often resist to professional reorientations representing a step towards downward mobility given their qualification and previous occupation to preserve their own work (and life) chances in the longer run. The opposite is true for lower educated women or for those who entered lone parenthood at older ages. With fewer opportunities on the labour market and relatively low-paid jobs, they suffer also for worse conditions to negotiate with the father of the child, they are often inadequately supported, and struggle to maintain a gainful activity and care for children at the same time (Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016b).

The household composition in terms of number and age of the children is an additional important factor in defining the employment patterns and potential negative spill-over from family to work. The older the youngest child in the household, the higher the likelihood that mothers keep on working or even increase their working time after becoming lone parents. Direct-care-time need decreases as children grow older and a part-time employment is easily compatible with school schedules. Yet, only mothers living with one or two children are likely to take up work when lone parenthood occurs: those with more than two children they probably opted for inactivity even before lone parenthood and kept on out of the labour force thereafter. These findings seem to confirm earlier ideas of family cycles (Glick, 1977) in showing how the age of the family members may differentiate the multiple constraints faced by parents and the contingency of their needs.

4.3 The relationship between lone motherhood, health, and employment

In this subsection we summarize the findings of a recently published research on the Swiss context in which we study how disadvantages in different life domains can be associated with a higher exposure to vulnerability the health domain (Struffolino et al., 2016). More in detail, we asked whether in Switzerland being a lone mother is associated with poorer health compared to being a mother living a couple and if such relationship is moderated by education and being employed.

The existing empirical evidence on the relationship between paid work and health for lone parents report mixed empirical evidence (Friedland & Price, 2003; Macran, Clarke, Sloggett, & Bethune, 1994). The negative association between labour market participation and lone parents' health has been found to be partly attributable to the difficulties in work-family reconciliation (Okechukwu, El Ayadi, Tamers, Sabbath, & Berkman, 2011; Sabbath, Melchior, Goldberg, Zins, & Berkman, 2011). A systematic review of health determinants and their changes over time show that employment has a positive effect on women with few family burdens (typically childless women or mothers with older children) and a negative effect when combined with other stress factors, such as heavy work and care loads (Cullati, 2014).

Moreover, the negative effect of unemployment on lone mothers' physical and psychological health seems to be largely explained by differences in disposable income (e.g. Hewitt, Baxter, & Western, 2006; Wickrama et al., 2006), even though with some exceptions (e.g. Ross & Bird, 1994). Finally, welfare state and social policies are important determinants of health and inequalities in health (Beckfield & Krieger, 2009; Berkman et al., 2015): given the Swiss welfare configuration lone mothers might be subjected to considerable amount of stress because family care is framed as a private matter (Valarino & Bernardi, 2010). For this reason, we explored the potential mediation of education and working-hours arrangements: both factors might indeed provide lone mothers with additional resources to moderate work-family reconciliation issues.

We hypothesised that lone mothers indeed report poorer health compared to mothers living in a couple because of their dual role as main earner and primary/sole caregiver even after controlling by differences in income. However, firstly, we expected employment to be associated with better health for highly educated lone mothers only. Second, we expected a positive association between part-time work and health for mothers with a partner but a less positive or negative association for lone mothers, because whereas part-time work may make it easier to combine work and childcare responsibilities for mothers living with a partner, for lone mothers this advantage may be cancelled out by financial difficulties.

We used longitudinal data from the *Swiss Household Panel* (waves 1999-2011). In 2011, the SHP consisted of two samples: the 1999 sample (5,074 households and 7,799 household members in 1999) and the 2004 refreshment sample (2,538 households and 3,654 household members in 2004). We selected a subsample of women who were 19 to 54 years old and resided in households with at least one biological child younger than 18 at the

moment of the interview. Given the panel structure of the data, each individual could be observed multiple times: our final sample consists of 10,598 annual observations nested in 2,114 persons⁴. We estimated multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression models for binary outcomes with clustered robust standard errors (Brüderl, 2010; Halaby, 2004).

Our findings show that lone mothers are more likely to report bad health than mothers in couples, but this difference is mediated by income. Furthermore, lone mothers' health is positively associated with working (vs. being inactive or unemployed) as for mothers in couples. However, the subgroups of upper and lower secondary educated lone mothers who are jobless report worse health conditions. When we move to consider the association between health and working hours, lone mothers have a higher probability of being in good health when working full-time vs. part-time (especially small part-time below 50%), while the contrary applies to mothers in couple.

The simultaneous associations we found between employment, family, and health conditions of lone mothers are still valid and valuable in themselves. They hint at specific interdependencies and conjunctures of different life course domains, which are likely to result in multiple disadvantages and health inequalities. Such constellations might result in a general disadvantages that may produce further vulnerability, particularly when welfare policies designed to compensate for it are based on a normative understanding of the family (a couple with a main earner and secondary earner/primary caregiver) and labour market participation (full employment for the main earner and part-time employment for the secondary earner).

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper offers an overview of recent empirical evidence on vulnerability of lone mothers in Switzerland. By adopting a life course perspective, we understand vulnerability as a life condition in which individual functioning suffers from a weakening process triggered by a lack of resources in one or more domains (Spini et al., 2013). By scrutinizing this topic in the Swiss context, we aimed at showing how welfare policies and gendered institutions, blind to the specific needs of lone parents' population and their children, may accentuate their risk of exposure to vulnerability. While our data concerns only mothers, given the existing evidence on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages as well as marital instability and lone parenthood (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Wolfinger, 2011), our argument is important for understanding the mechanisms reproducing social inequalities across families.

We first presented a comprehensive picture of the evolution over time of the characteristics of lone mothers compared to mothers in couple and women in couple with

respects to their labour market participation. We then explored the transition to lone motherhood and the intersection between two life domains, family and employment, and hinted at the association with health. Furthermore, we highlighted the ambivalent role that employment may represent for women with fewer or weaker background resources and multiple burdens. On the one hand, employment can be an activating tool and a means of resilience, on the other hand it has the potential disadvantage of worsening life conditions by producing time squeeze and responsibility overload. Lastly, the intersection between employment and health for lone mothers appears to be partially mediated by individual resources (education) and structural characteristics of the jobs (working-hours).

Lone motherhood—understood as non-normative type of parenthood—is experienced by an increasing number of women and represents a life-course transition that can compromise their resources: the decrease in the available income within the household and the increased exposure to stress. The reduced resources at the individual level are not always balanced by support from different institutional and non-institutional actors. Both actors though represent a particularly important buffer for lone parents (LIVES, 2014). Differences among lone mothers in the type and the amount of resources that can be mobilize are likely to mediate the extent to which *multidimensionality* and *multidirectionality* of vulnerability express themselves and affect individual choices in everyday life. The need to provide for their children may leave lone mothers little choice on whether and to what extent to be active on the labour market; the reduced flexibility in arranging work and family responsibilities often squeezes their time schedule; their activity in not-enough-remunerative jobs often add on their economic pressure; finally, the consequence of little free time and separation may leave them with a weak social network to rely on (Gingrich, 2008; Leslie & Grady, 1985; McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981). These are all life circumstances that can trigger alternate falls and rises and make lone parents vulnerable.

The welfare state represents an important moderating factor of the negative effects of the exposure to vulnerability broadly and dynamically understood, both during and after to the transition to lone parenthood. However, if policies are designed around a normative definition of the family (i.e. a couple with a main earner and secondary earner/primary caregiver) and of labour market participation (full employment for the main earner and part-time employment for the secondary earner), they are hardly fit to address needs specific to non-normative life course conditions. This is particularly important because the evidence on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage from parents to children depending on

parents' living arrangements shows that these processes are mediated by parental socio-economic status and the related parenting style and social closure. Once again, detecting under which conditions and the pathways through which social class, education, and employment bundle together with social and economic impoverishment is crucial in understanding the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequalities across generations.

Future research should explore to which extent such effects are driven by the institutional, financial, social, and time resources available to lone parents to fulfil their double role and by the uncertain prospects in the labour market. How people manage everyday family life is a personal, a political issue, a social class and a gendered issue and “the need to balance work and care is greater at certain stages of the life-course, in particular when caring for children”, and can be particularly problematic for some mothers, like those heading one-parent households (Millar & Ridge, 2013:1). Another salient emerging theme concerns lone fathers. The share of men who experience lone parenthood—especially in contexts where joint custody is preferred—is likely to increase in Switzerland as well as in other European countries. Since parental and work experiences are strongly gender specific, it would be extremely interesting to test whether gender-based (dis)advantages exist, also within the association of lone parenthood to other life domains where vulnerability can emerge.

6. Notes

¹ Additional information about comparability over time and the quality of the data: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/EN/employ_esms.htm).

² Welfare-to-work (or workfare/work-first) refers to policies that aim at fostering labour market participation of unemployed people who receive welfare benefits. A discussion on the effectiveness of these policies in alleviating poverty, improving human capital that arguably creates better opportunities in the labour market, and affecting other life domains (see e.g. Campbell, Thomson, Fenton, & Gibson, 2016; Greenberg & Robins, 2010) is beyond the aim of this paper: however, it is worth mentioning that such programs varies to a great extent across countries, and in general empirical findings available so far are not conclusive on this matter, even when focussing on lone parents only (see e.g. for Australia—where workfare programs were reformed several times over the last decade—<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/bibliography/sole-parenting-welfare-work>).

³ For additional information on the survey design see (Voorpostel et al., 2015).

⁴ We acknowledge that the association between household type and health as well as between employment and health can result from both causation and selection processes. Moreover, we cannot exclude a two-way-selection process, because of the simultaneity of events which can only be disentangled through time-lagged models over an extended period (see Headey & Muffels [2014] for a simulation study on life-satisfaction). Unfortunately, the small initial sample size of lone mothers did not allowed for more sophisticated modelling strategies. For a detailed discussion on this matter for the results summarized here, please refer to Struffolino, Bernardi, & Voorpostel (2016).

7. References

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8. Appendix

Figure A1: Share of lone mothers, mothers in couple, and women in couple, 1991-2013.

Year of the survey	Lone mothers	Mothers in couple	Women in couple	Tot.	N.
1991	7.6	58.6	33.8	100	3,791
1992	7.5	60.1	32.4	100	4,013
1993	7.1	62.0	30.9	100	4,125
1994	7.5	60.8	31.8	100	4,104
1995	7.2	61.7	31.1	100	7,203
1996	7.6	61.6	30.8	100	3,584
1997	7.5	61.8	30.7	100	3,541
1998	7.0	61.0	32.0	100	3,499
1999	7.8	60.3	31.9	100	3,771
2000	7.5	60.6	31.9	100	3,740
2001	7.7	61.7	30.7	100	7,764
2002	8.3	63.0	28.7	100	8,622
2003	7.2	66.1	26.7	100	12,728
2004	7.3	66.4	26.4	100	11,844
2005	7.4	65.9	26.7	100	11,170
2006	7.1	66.3	26.7	100	10,384
2007	7.5	65.4	27.1	100	10,478
2008	8.2	65.2	26.6	100	10,196
2009	8.5	65.7	25.8	100	10,377
2010	9.7	61.8	28.5	100	3,311
2011	10.0	61.5	28.5	100	3,595
2012	10.3	61.3	28.4	100	3,641
2013	10.6	61.1	28.3	100	3,566
Tot.	7.8	63.7	28.5	100	149,047

Source: *Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS)*. Authors' calculations.

Figure A2: Lone mothers by educational level, 1991-2013.

Year of the survey	Education			Tot.	N.
	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Tertiary		
1991	25.4	60.3	14.3	100	287
1992	23.2	62.6	14.2	100	302
1993	24.8	62.6	12.6	100	294
1994	26.1	59.2	14.7	100	306
1995	30.2	59.4	10.4	100	520
1996	27.9	62.5	9.6	100	272
1997	22.6	65.8	11.7	100	266
1998	22.8	65.0	12.2	100	246
1999	19.7	65.1	15.3	100	295
2000	15.7	69.8	14.6	100	281
2001	19.1	67.5	13.4	100	596
2002	17.7	64.0	18.4	100	714
2003	23.4	57.4	19.2	100	914
2004	23.7	56.3	20.1	100	862
2005	23.2	55.0	21.8	100	829
2006	24.4	49.5	26.1	100	737
2007	19.1	56.5	24.4	100	782
2008	18.5	55.4	26.1	100	838
2009	18.7	56.0	25.3	100	877
2010	16.8	58.6	24.6	100	321
2011	17.5	55.1	27.4	100	361
2012	17.6	54.9	27.5	100	375
2013	14.6	52.4	33.1	100	378
Tot.	21.3	58.4	20.3	100	11,653

Source: *Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS)*. Authors' calculations.