

## Stream 13. Family Policies and the Reconciling of Paid Work and Care

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### Abstract

More than a quarter of dependant families in Northern Ireland are headed by a lone parent, most of whom are women. They have the lowest standard of living of any household type and are more than twice as likely as other households to be poor. The policy response to lone parent poverty in the UK has been to increase labour market participation based on the premise that work is the best route out of poverty. Strategies to do so have included the adoption of increasingly stringent welfare to work measures.

This paper considers the potential impact of these policies in the context of the social and economic circumstances pertaining in Northern Ireland, including women's over-representation in low paid part-time work, the pressures created by the increasing 'flexibility' demanded by employers, weak support in terms of childcare and other provision, the poor health (especially mental health) experienced by a significant number of lone parents and the impact of the recession. It draws on findings from a qualitative study with eight-two lone parents in Northern Ireland which looked holistically at the lives of lone parents and the factors determining their 'choice' or ability to participate in paid work.

The data reveal the complex realities surrounding lone parents and paid work as they feel increasing pressure to reconcile this with their caring responsibilities. The findings suggest that the failure to acknowledge a number of important, and sensitive issues, not only calls into question the likely success of the welfare to work strategy, but suggests that it could have a detrimental impact on some lone parent families. The findings have broader relevance but they also raise particular issues relating to whether the Northern Ireland government should use the policy making powers it holds as a devolved government to develop alternative policies.