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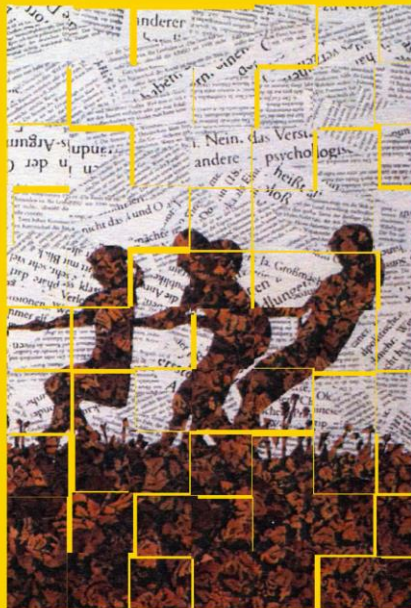
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Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare

Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe



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No Right to Family Life? Single Mothers and their Children in a “Mixed Economy of Welfare” in Switzerland, 1930s–1950s*

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In Switzerland, historical research, as well as a broader political public, has recently addressed the issue of the out-of-home placement of children from families experiencing poverty.¹ In 1930, 4 to 5 percent of children under the age of 14, that is, about 60,000 people, lived with foster families or in residential care. The practice of the out-of-home placement of children was widespread between 1930 and 1950, before it declined in the second half of the twentieth century.² For many children, the separation from their parents and siblings was a violent experience.³

Historians argue that children from so-called “incomplete families” were affected to a great extent by out-of-home placements, and that authorities particularly placed children of single mothers in foster families or residential care.⁴ However, there has been little research into the reasons for these structural disadvantages. This article, which examines social welfare records of the city of Bern from the 1930s to the 1950s, shows how single mothers and their children positioned themselves in the context of a “mixed economy of welfare”. As Geoffrey Finlayson argues, the mixed economy of welfare has long been dominant in European societies: “There was always what is now often called a ‘mixed economy of welfare’, and within that mixed economy, the state was only one element – and arguably, for much of the nineteenth and even the twentieth century – it was not the most important.”⁵ Consequently, the study of a mixed economy of welfare explores the forms of support provided by private actors such as families and philanthropic organisations, as well as by the state, and analyses the cooperation of these different groups of actors. Of special interest are the power relations between these various private and public actors and the circulation of people, money, practices and policies in a mixed economy of welfare.⁶ The following article examines to what extent single mothers benefited from philanthropic associations, municipal welfare services, family allowances and survivors’ insurance. What was the importance of private associations and family networks in enabling single mothers and their children to claim a right to family life? What ruptures and trajectories can be identified in the formation of a mixed economy of welfare in the period under study, which was marked by the Second World War? It shows that the needs of single mothers were inadequately addressed by the welfare state, which has based the design of social safety nets on “normal families”, with a male breadwinner. The welfare state did not eliminate

discrimination against women in the labour market and in family law, but in some cases it exacerbated it. The welfare authorities often described the out-of-home placement of children of single mothers as a “solution” to social problems. However, as the article argues, out-of-home placements were, in fact, a direct consequence of the structural discrimination suffered by single mothers.

During the period under study, the mixed economy of welfare in Switzerland was both multifaceted and changeable. Single mothers in poverty tried to support themselves and their children in different ways, sometimes with the help of family members, friends and neighbours as initial sources of support. Assistance from private organisations is also mentioned in the sources. However, when the state effectively became an aid agency, these support measures were reorganised and single mothers who were dependent on welfare were often excluded from support from private organisations. In Switzerland, the period after the Second World War was one of upheaval in terms of the organisation of social security. A new widows’ and survivors’ insurance came into force, and family allowances were included in the constitution. While these new social insurance schemes undoubtedly brought improvements, it is important to understand how gender shaped the organisation of this mixed economy of welfare and continued to foster certain forms of social inequality. The role of foster families in this context also needs to be critically examined; while they often played an important role, they could also be problematic in the provision of welfare.

State of research and sources examined

Recently, several studies on the history of foster care in Switzerland examining the placement of children in both institutions and families have been published.⁷ Similar to other countries, research projects have been launched to investigate the coercive dimension of these measures. The evaluation of case files plays a particularly important role in these studies.⁸ However, in examining the placement of children in Switzerland, historical research has focused heavily on guardianship files, while social welfare files have not been the main focus of research to date. Yet, these sources open up the possibility of precisely illuminating the vulnerable position of impoverished single mothers and their children in a mixed economy of welfare.⁹ The Bernese social welfare files, of which several thousand are kept in the Bern City Archives, are an exceptional source; it is rare for any city to archive welfare files in such large numbers. It is also a challenging collection, as the files are not archived chronologically or according to any particular system, and there is no complete register. The source material, which includes case records from the 1930s to 1950s, provides insight into various forms of poverty: Bernese people were dependent on state support due to old age, illness, low income or the death of the breadwinner, among other

reasons. Unfortunately, little is known about the history of the archiving of the files. For decades, the files were stored in boxes with no access. In order to make the source material available for research, the Bern City Archives produced scans of the “welfare worker’s reports” (*Informatorenberichte*) of around 2,000 case files, which provide a first glimpse into the extensive archive. From this digitalised inventory, 300 reports of impoverished families were reviewed for this study.

The archive situation results in certain limitations for research. For example, it is not possible to make precise quantitative statements about the out-of-home placement of children on the basis of these files. They do, however, provide an opportunity to examine the relationships among the various actors in the mixed economy of welfare and shed light on the position of impoverished single mothers. The files are extensive and often include hundreds of documents, such as reports and letters from the various welfare agencies and social workers. Many case files also contain letters from social welfare recipients as well as expert opinions from psychiatrists or psychologists.

In the majority of the 300 cases examined (78 percent), the families received social welfare from the city of Bern and they were allowed to live together. However, in the remaining 22 percent of cases examined, the children of these impoverished families were placed in foster care, either with other families or in institutions. As mentioned above, the selected case sample does not allow us to draw precise conclusions about the number of decisions made by the authorities regarding out-of-home placements. The sample does, however, provide indications of trends that should be clarified by further research. Between 1930 and 1960, approximate 3.5–4 percent of all children born in Switzerland were born out of wedlock.¹⁰ The sample indicates that, in this period, single mothers, and especially unmarried mothers, were most frequently affected by child abduction, measured by the total number of parents. It is true that married couples who were dependent on the social welfare of the city of Bern were also forced to place their children with peasant families or in institutions. In the sample examined, in 58 percent of all cases, children of married couples were placed outside their family. This was especially the case during the economic crises of the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹ However, as the study sample indicates, single mothers were proportionally more often affected by these compulsory welfare measures. In the sample examined, 18 percent of out-of-home placements of children involved unmarried mothers and 15 percent involved divorced women. In 6 percent of the cases, widows had to place their children with other families or in institutional care. Finally, the sample includes one case of a divorced father and one case of a widower who had to place their children outside of the family. Joëlle Droux and Véronique Czáká arrive at comparable results for French-speaking Switzerland. For 1959, they show that children born to unmarried mothers were proportionally much more often placed outside the home than children born in wedlock.¹²

The following sections explain the organisation of the out-of-home placement of children as it prevailed in Bern from the 1930s through to the 1950s. We then focus on three different case studies, illuminating out-of-home placements of the children of

widowed, divorced and unmarried mothers. While these women all shared certain challenges, such as very low wages, their different civil statuses meant that they had differing access to a mixed economy of welfare and, correspondingly, differing scopes of action to live with their children. In this sense, “single mother” has to be understood as a multifaceted term that encompasses the various legal and social realities of a distinct group of women. Nevertheless, as several pioneering studies in women’s history have shown, the history of single mothers provides a particularly clear insight into the gendered power structures of a society.¹³

The legal basis for the out-of-home placement of children

In the period under study from the 1930s to 1950s, different institutions in the Bernese Directorate of Social Welfare dealt with the placement of children. The first was the Poor Relief Department,¹⁴ which operated under the Poor and Settlement Law of 28 November 1897: Paragraph 88 stipulated that support should be given to children under the age of 16 who were “morally endangered”, “depraved” or “neglected”, and whose welfare required that they be placed in a “family”, or in an “educational or reformatory institution”.¹⁵ In the early twentieth century, Bern’s Inspectorate for the Poor oversaw the largest number of foster children.¹⁶ This illustrates that the placement of children was initially primarily a welfare measure for the poor. However, even in the second half of the twentieth century, a large proportion of foster children were dependent on social welfare.¹⁷

In addition to the Poor and Settlement Law, the Swiss Civil Code, introduced in 1912, formed an important legal basis for the out-of-home placement of children. Articles 283, 284 and 285 of the code defined the conditions for the withdrawal of parental authority and for the placement of children with a third party, though the provisions regarding “permanent endangerment” and “neglect” offered wide scope for interpretation. Article 284 states: “If a child’s physical well-being is permanently endangered, or if he or she is neglected, the guardianship authority shall take him or her away from the parents and place him or her in a family or institution in an appropriate manner.” In Bern, out-of-home placements under guardianship law fell within the remit of the Guardianship and Youth Welfare Department during the period under review. The smallest department dealing with foster children in Bern was the Foster Child Supervision, which primarily took care of children from “incomplete” families, that is, children from marriages that ended in divorce, illegitimate children and half-orphans.¹⁸ A secretary was entrusted with the management and administrative tasks of foster child supervision, and a social worker carried out home visits. Similar to the official guardians, the supervising secretary often took on guardianships herself.¹⁹

In Bern, different departments were thus responsible for foster children, and the

administrative reports regularly pointed out the close interconnection of different institutional actors in the foster system. The decisions were also based on different legal principles, some of which were included in the Poor and Settlement Law, and others on the Civil Code.²⁰ During the period under review, more than 1,200 Bernese children per year were placed with families or in institutions. The highest number of out-of-home placements was in 1930, with over 1,800 placements; even as late as 1960, Bern counted over 1,400 foster children.²¹ To date, there are no national statistics in Switzerland documenting the out-of-home placement of children. It remains a research desideratum to show the differences between Swiss cantons and cities in the foster care of children.

Poor through no fault of their own: Widows and the out-of-home placement of children

In the first half of the twentieth century, the risk of losing one's spouse was lower in Switzerland than in neighbouring countries, since Switzerland was not directly involved in both world wars, and therefore had hardly any war widows. Nevertheless, the risk of losing one's spouse at a relatively young age due to fatal diseases such as tuberculosis was also high in Switzerland until the middle of the twentieth century, especially for those from the lower social classes.²²

The Müller family was affected by this disease in the early 1940s.²³ The husband, Walter Müller, fell ill with renal tuberculosis and was no longer able to work. The family of five was dependent on social welfare support. At the end of 1943, the responsible male welfare worker (*Informator*) suggested that the three boys to be placed outside the home:

Mrs Müller remains in the apartment ... with the three children born in 1937/40 and '41. For the time being, the woman will not be able to earn an income. I have suggested that she give one or two children to relatives or acquaintances. Mrs Müller cannot decide to do this and there is no reason for taking them away.²⁴

Unlike female social workers employed by the city, male welfare workers did not attend a social work school but had oftentimes previously worked as police officers.²⁵ This particular welfare worker stated that the best interests of the Müller children were not endangered and that it was, according to the law, therefore not possible to place the children outside the home against the mother's will. At the same time, his statement was not simply well-intentioned advice; rather, the possibility of placing the children outside the home was henceforth seen as a precautionary measure, and thus an actual threat.

Walter Müller died in the summer of 1944, at which time his widow, Maria Müller, worked for the federal armoury. She was poorly paid, however, and she only earned about 100 francs a month, which was not enough to support her family.²⁶ The files further show that Maria had only a small family and friendship solidarity network that was willing to provide support,²⁷ and there are no indications that she received support from any private

associations. During the course of professionalising social welfare in Switzerland, the authorities endeavoured to minimise duplication between private and public assistance.²⁸ However, this also meant that the possibilities for single mothers affected by poverty to obtain help within the framework of a mixed economy of welfare were severely restricted.

Social welfare: Precarious subsistence

What help could Maria Müller and her three children expect? Until the mid-1940s, the Swiss welfare state was barely developed; unlike in other European countries, there was neither national survivors' insurance nor family allowances. Maria and her children therefore only benefited from state support through the social welfare from the city of Bern. The family received monthly support contributions, which primarily financed rent, food and the occasional item of clothing, as well as the annual rent for the land that Maria worked to grow some of her own food.²⁹ However, social welfare did not enable the family to move into a better apartment, even though the authorities recognised that their home did not meet the official hygiene standards. There was an acute housing shortage at the time, so Maria and her children had to remain in this precarious living situation.³⁰ Until the end of the 1940s, Bern did not always ensure that families had an appropriate level of physical subsistence, and there were often glaring deficiencies with regard to housing conditions.

When Maria lost her job as a home worker at the armoury in 1946, due to a lack of work orders, she was forced to take up employment outside the home as a cleaner. She asked a neighbour to look after her children for a small fee, thereby trying to fall back on her informal female solidarity network. However, the welfare worker in charge did not approve and demanded that the children attend a crèche,³¹ subsidised by the city, meaning the fee was relatively low.³² However, women's wages were often so low that employment, in combination with the use of a crèche, was only marginally financially worthwhile. Secondly, the establishment of crèches was primarily intended to enable young children to remain with their families. The system of the "temporary family", which had existed in Switzerland and numerous other European countries for centuries and in which the duration of the cohabitation of family members was limited to a few years, was not called into question by the communal childcare services. Thus, the Bernese welfare authorities advocated the maintenance of crèches, while requiring that children be placed with peasant families as soon as they could be used as labourers. The tenth year of a child's life was an important turning point.³³

For single mothers like Maria Müller who belonged to the working poor, the workload was enormous. In addition to poorly paid employment outside the home, she had to take care of the children, run the household and cultivate her plot of land. The welfare authorities recognised that this workload was not sustainable over the long term. In the Müller case, as

in numerous others, the placement of the children outside the home was always considered a solution to this problem. The social welfare authorities followed the logic of leaving small children with widowed women who were affected by poverty, but then initiating a placement away from home as soon as the children were capable of working (that is, at around ten years of age).³⁴ Thereby, the authorities did not only legitimise their decision with financial considerations. Rather, they also cited criticisms of the mothers’ parenting skills or “moral behaviour”. This was also the case with Maria Müller. Over the years, the criticism of her upbringing of the sons increased.³⁵ Thus, the placement outside the parental home appeared to be a measure ordered in the best interest of the children.

Maria was dependent on social welfare, like many other parents, and she finally gave in to pressure from the authorities. While she had initially vehemently rejected out-of-home placement, in May 1947 she agreed to place her eldest son, who had recently turned ten, “in a foster home if she knew he would be well accommodated”.³⁶ Her son was eventually placed with a farmer’s family in a rural community, with social welfare covering the annual boarding fee of 420 francs.³⁷ As the files show, Maria was rarely able to visit him as the cost of travel was prohibitively expensive.

Until the 1940s, the welfare authorities in Bern regularly received requests from farming families who hoped that a foster child would ease their work burden: on the one hand, foster children had to work on the farm and often replaced a paid farmhand or maid; on the other, the boarding allowance paid by the welfare authorities or the parents was an important additional income.³⁸ The placement of a child into a foster family was also a relief for the welfare authorities in Bern, as it meant that the support contributions to the family could be reduced, and it also eased the acute housing shortage in the city.

The introduction of survivors’ insurance and family allowances

Among single mothers, it was, above all, widowed women who, according to prevailing ideas, classified themselves as “worthy poor”. They had to support their families without a male breadwinner through no fault of their own, but because of a stroke of fate. As in other countries, the need for survivors’ insurance had been discussed in Switzerland since the end of the nineteenth century, but a law introducing old-age and survivors’ insurance was rejected by the electorate in 1931.³⁹ It was not until after the Second World War that the old-age and survivors’ insurance finally came into being. Switzerland had tried out a model of social redistribution with the wage and earnings replacement scheme, which insured conscripted soldiers during the war. This was viewed positively, and thus opened the way for old-age and survivors’ insurance. This insurance gave people over 65, widows and orphans the right to social benefits. Switzerland no longer wanted to be considered a laggard by international comparison in the expansion of the welfare state.⁴⁰

In addition to the introduction of old-age and survivors’ insurance, there were increasing calls from the 1930s for the establishment of family allowances. In the interwar

period, these had already been established in various European countries, such as Belgium and France.⁴¹ An important milestone in the debate on social security for families occurred in Switzerland in 1941, when the Catholic Party (Katholisch-konservative Volkspartei) launched the “Family Initiative”. The initiative demanded the payment of family, child and old-age allowances, as well as measures to improve housing.⁴² The Federal Council took up the concerns of the initiative, but fleshed them out according to its own ideas and drew up a counter-proposal.

The Federal Council’s report, published in 1944, touched on the situation of poverty-stricken families at various points, highlighting the precarious situation of working-class families from the lower social strata, as well as financially weak farming families.⁴³ In order to better protect families economically, family allowances played a key role, as the Federal Council went on to explain.⁴⁴ For the Federal Council, as well as the political parties, it was beyond dispute that family allowances should primarily be designed as a supplement to the male breadwinner’s wage. Accordingly, in political discourse, there were no arguments that women’s low wages should be improved by family supplements to the extent that the family’s existence could also be secured for single mothers.

In 1945, voters approved the Federal Council’s counter-proposal by a large majority. From 1952, there were nationwide guidelines on family allowances for small farmers and people employed in agriculture and, from 1959, for federal personnel. Further expansion of family allowances at the federal level stagnated, however, so that expansions initially took place primarily at the cantonal level. The article on family protection that was adopted in 1945 in the Swiss constitution did not immediately improve the position of all families in the social security system; it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that family allowances were gradually expanded.⁴⁵ Survivors’ insurance were initially quite modest, and the design of family allowances progressed slowly. Nevertheless, the sample of cases studied shows that the expansion of the welfare state changed the situation for families affected by poverty in the 1950s. Survivors’ insurance, for example, provided considerable relief for widows and orphans. This is also evident in the case of the Müller family, who now received monthly benefits of approximately 90 franks as a result of this new social insurance.⁴⁶

Continuity of the patriarchal order: Divorced mothers and their children

As historical case studies show, the majority of divorce petitions in Switzerland in the twentieth century were filed by women, with those from the lower social classes being disproportionately represented. Women often sought to free themselves from violent relationships through divorce. In many cases, they also complained in court that their husbands were endangering the family economy through a “dissolute” lifestyle.⁴⁷ In 1900,

there were about five divorces for every 100 marriages; by 1940, this had increased to 9.5/100, and by 1970, over 15 percent of marriages ended in divorce.⁴⁸

According to the Civil Code, the husband was the “head of the family” (Article 160). Yet, as evidence from the sample examined makes clear, divorce did not usually mean liberation from a patriarchally structured gender order for women. Rather, they were confronted with the fact that their children were now placed under guardianship and that they could only determine the structure of their family life to a limited extent. This was the case with Anita Weber, one of the case files in the research sample.⁴⁹ Anita was divorced from her husband at the beginning of 1943. The judges awarded the eldest son to the father, and the two younger children, aged three and five years, to her.⁵⁰ However, the eldest son did not subsequently live with his father, but with his paternal grandparents; it was common practice for fathers to place their children with their own parents or siblings, rather than face the hardships of being a single parent. As recorded in the case records, all three Weber children were subjected to the foster care supervision of the city of Bern, as the judges had placed them under “guardianship supervision” in the divorce decree.⁵¹ The Civil Code stipulated that, in the event of a divorce, the court should only call in the guardianship authorities “if necessary” (Article 156). However, as the sample of cases shows, courts often consulted the guardianship authorities, at least in the case of lower-class couples, and ordered guardianship measures against the children of divorced parents. In doing so, the courts referred to Article 283 of the Civil Code: “In the event of conduct on the part of the parents which is in breach of their duties, the guardianship authorities shall take such precautions as are appropriate for the protection of the child.”⁵² In the view of the judges, as well as that of the guardianship authorities, married couples who divorced were not only guilty of violating the prevailing norms regarding marital relationships, but also of failing to meet the normative requirements for parenthood.⁵³

In the case of Anita Weber, guardianship supervision meant that she was inspected at regular intervals by the social worker responsible for foster child supervision in Bern. During a visit in January 1945, the social worker found that the family was “in great financial distress”.⁵⁴ She reported the case to the social welfare authorities, whereupon a welfare worker of the Poor Relief Department also paid a visit to the family’s home.⁵⁵ In the case of Anita, welfare dependency posed a particularly significant threat because she did not have the “right of domicile” (*Heimatrecht*) in Bern, but rather in a rural village in the canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, then one of the poorest Swiss cantons. She originally possessed the right of domicile in a village close to Bern, and then acquired her husband’s right of domicile through marriage and remained a citizen of this Appenzell village even after her divorce, which proved to be disadvantageous in her case.⁵⁶ In Switzerland, as in other European countries, the right of domicile structured the organisation of social welfare. The *Heimatprinzip* in welfare, which dates back to the early modern period, determined that, in case of need, the municipalities were obliged to care for their citizens. While other countries, such as Germany and Austria, abandoned the *Heimatprinzip* in social welfare in

the early twentieth century, and determined that the place of residence was responsible for supporting impoverished people, Switzerland did not completely abandon the *Heimatprinzip* until the early 1970s.⁵⁷

The *Heimatprinzip* meant that welfare for the Weber family was the responsibility of the Appenzell village, and not Bern. When the welfare authorities in Bern requested financial support for the Weber family, the authorities of the Appenzell village refused, saying they were not prepared to make a financial contribution to the rent. They were only willing to take the children into the communal orphanage, and to send Anita Weber to the local poorhouse.⁵⁸ This “repatriation” would undoubtedly have meant great hardship; not only would the children have been separated from their mother, but the repatriation to the orphanage or the local poorhouse would also have meant that the family members would have been housed far away from Bern in institutions that were themselves financially deprived. These rural welfare institutions had a bad reputation for their unhygienic living conditions and frequent violent incidents.⁵⁹

Professional welfare and guardianship authorities in Swiss cities such as Bern, Basel, Zurich and Geneva endeavoured to avert such repatriations.⁶⁰ In the case of Anita Weber and her children, the foster child supervisor in Bern worked to prevent the family from being sent to the Appenzell village. In the end, however, the foster child supervision authorities decided that the solution to Anita’s problems was not to increase their financial contributions, but to split the family. In May 1945, they succeeded in placing the children with middle-class relatives of Anita’s who lived in the canton of Bern.⁶¹ The relatives’ willingness to take the children into care undoubtedly saved them from being sent to the orphanage in Appenzell, or being placed with peasant families they did not know and where they would have had to work hard. Nevertheless, they were denied the right to grow up with their mother. Divorced women from the lower social classes paid a high price for their decision to separate from their spouses, as the authorities often prevented them from living with their children.

Without rights? Unmarried mothers and their children

Children of divorced parents were often, but not always, given a guardian. In contrast, children of unmarried mothers were generally under guardianship until well into the twentieth century. Moreover, children born out of wedlock were legally discriminated against compared to children born in wedlock. The Civil Code stipulated that a relationship of kinship between an unmarried mother and a child was established at birth. In contrast, an illegitimate child entered into a full relationship with their father only if the latter presented an “acknowledgment with succession” (*Anerkennung mit Standesfolge*). If the father did not provide this, there was only a “paying paternity” between the father and his child born out of

wedlock. This meant that the father had to make maintenance contributions to his child. However, the child was deemed to be unrelated to him, and was therefore not entitled to inheritance.⁶²

The Civil Code stipulated that the guardianship authorities, as soon as they were aware of a birth out of wedlock, had to appoint a guardian for the child to look after their interests (Article 311). In particular, the guardian’s task was to determine whether it was appropriate for the unmarried mother to be granted custody. Prior to the 1960s, authorities usually denied custody to unmarried mothers, leaving their children under guardianship.⁶³ Thus, all major decisions about the child’s upbringing and care no longer rested with the child’s mother, but with the guardian.

In the mid-1940s, the canton of Bern tightened the supervision of all foster care relationships and issued the Decree on the Supervision of Foster Children, which came into force in 1945 and was designed to ensure a uniform registration of all foster children, defined as all children of preschool and school age whose care and upbringing had been entrusted to persons other than their parents for a significant period of time. The intention of the new provisions was to protect children from violence and exploitative working conditions.⁶⁴ Conversely, however, official intervention in placement relationships could also run counter to the interests of mothers and their children. It was not the mothers who could ultimately decide on the placement of their children, but the guardians who were in a position of power. Unmarried mothers were particularly affected by this new decree.

After the enactment of the new decree, social welfare authorities in Bern turned more often to the guardianship authorities and requested information about the placement of children whose parents were dependent on social welfare. If the foster families were found to be financially secure and of good reputation, the Bernese authorities were usually satisfied. If, on the other hand, the children were placed with lower-class relatives who did not conform to certain family norms, the welfare authorities increased the pressure of control. Paradigmatic of this is the re-placement of Nina Huber’s children, who were born out of wedlock and had lived with their grandparents and aunts. Nina, who was pursuing a job in another city, lived separately from her children. For several years, with the help of her family, she managed to support her children independently. Then, in 1943, she fell ill with tuberculosis and was consequently dependent on social welfare; in 1945, the authorities deemed her foster care arrangements unsuitable. On the one hand, the grandfather was now in need of care himself, due to his advanced age, and could no longer act as a guardian for his grandchildren. On the other hand, the placement with their aunts seemed problematic to the authorities, especially since one aunt was deaf and was erroneously devalued as “feeble-minded” in the files.⁶⁵

The social welfare authorities in Bern considered the re-placement of Nina’s children an urgent desideratum, and any ideas about the proper care of the children that were suggested by Nina carried no weight in the official decision-making process. In 1945, the welfare worker noted:

Ms Huber does not think that Kurt is badly housed. He has been in his grandfather's house since birth. The deaf-mute sister supervises him during the day when he is not at school. Besides, Kurt is now 11 years old and no longer a toddler. He was already bravely helping around the house, splitting wood, etc.⁶⁶

As the welfare worker further stated, Nina wanted to defend herself against the interference of the authorities, but was unable to prevail against the decision of the newly inserted guardian, a "poor-law administrator and teacher", and the re-placement of her children was enforced. The 11-year-old son was placed with a peasant family in the countryside, and a new foster home was sought for his 2-year-old sister.

As in numerous other cases involving the placement of illegitimate children, the case of Nina Huber shows the power of the authorities. The welfare authorities in Bern refused to provide financial support, while at the same time determining the foster care arrangements. By cooperating with the guardianship authorities, the Bern Social Welfare Office was eventually able to get the children assigned to another foster family. It is significant that neither Nina, as the mother of the children, nor the aunts and grandparents, who had taken over the supervision and care of the children for several years, nor the children themselves, were able to give their consent to the measure. The foster relationship that Nina and her parents and sisters had built up over the years, and which had made it possible for her son Kurt, in particular, to grow up with his grandparents and aunts for 11 years, was torn apart. The need of farming families in the canton of Bern to employ children as workers played a role in this decision, as did the ideas that hearing-impaired women could not raise children and that a male authority figure was needed, especially when raising boys. In particular, however, the authorities denied unmarried mothers the right to decide on the form of placement for their children. Legal discrimination against illegitimate children and unmarried mothers was not eliminated in Switzerland until 1976, with the revision of family law.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Swiss working-class women who were single parents in the 1930s through to the 1950s were rarely able to support themselves and their children as a result of widespread discrimination against women in the labour market. In particular, low-skilled jobs, such as sewing work or cleaning, were so poorly paid that women could not possibly support a family alone. As the research sample shows, single mothers were often able to fall back on a network of family and friends so that, for example, relatives bridged gaps in the care of the children. However, such networks were often fragile, leading many single mothers from the lower social classes to request support from the social welfare system and, as soon as they claimed state welfare benefits, they were forbidden to accept support from private associations. Particularly in cities such as Bern, welfare authorities sought to reorganise the

mixed economy of welfare in the course of the twentieth century and to separate welfare recipients from potential private donors.

Social welfare not only provided support, but also intervened in family relationships. In several of the cases examined here, it prohibited offers of help that single mothers received from their families or neighbours and ordered alternative care arrangements for the children. It is characteristic of the cases examined that the wishes and ideas of the single mothers, the kinship solidarity network, and also the children themselves, were neither systematically enquired about nor considered. Both the welfare and the guardianship authorities generally acted in a highly paternalistic manner towards the single mothers and ordered the children to be placed outside the home. While widows were generally not confronted with guardianship measures towards their children, authorities ordered guardianships over the children in the case of divorced women and, even more frequently, in the case of unmarried mothers. The combination of welfare dependency, on the one hand, and guardianship measures, on the other, often resulted in the out-of-home placement of the children of single mothers.

Being single was a social risk for women that was insufficiently cushioned during the period under study. It is true that, after the Second World War, Swiss social policy set an important course and thus changed the mixed economy of welfare. The introduction of old-age and survivors' insurance provided relief for widowed women and their children. The constitutional article introducing family allowances further expanded these support measures. However, the extent to which single mothers could profit from these benefits depended on their legal rights. Unmarried and divorced mothers, in particular, faced curtailments of custody rights. They were thus also restricted in their right to decide independently on the use of social benefits for the support of their family. However, this gender-specific risk of poverty has not been sufficiently discussed or politicised, either in the twentieth or the twenty-first century. Rather, the implicit notion prevails that divorced and single mothers should remain responsible for financing their families, or rely on social welfare as a safety net.

The removal of children is undoubtedly a drastic move on the part of the state and was often painful for both mothers and children. The research sample from the city of Bern evaluated here indicates that, especially up to the 1950s, numerous children of single mothers were placed elsewhere. This was not because the mothers had violated their parental duties, but because they were poor and had broken prevailing family norms or gender-specific requirements. Remarkably, these gender-specific discriminations have so far only been marginally addressed in the context of the reappraisal of the compulsory social measures of the Swiss welfare state.⁶⁸ It is high time that the injustices experienced by single mothers as a result of forced welfare measures is adequately researched, not least so that current social discrimination against single mothers can be more clearly identified and combated.

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