Alleenstaande moeders als kostwinner in de jaren vijftig en de levensloop van hun dochters: "Je leven zelf vorm geven"
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SUMMARY

This oral history research focuses on single mothers who were breadwinners in the nineteen fifties and the lives of their daughters. The central question is: how was the situation of widows, divorced and unmarried mothers as breadwinners in the nineteen fifties and what intergenerational significance did these mothers with a breadwinning role have on their daughters?

This study is based on the life stories of thirteen mothers (seven divorced mothers, five widows and one unmarried mother) and 34 daughters (seventeen daughters whose father passed away at a young age, sixteen daughters of divorced parents and one daughter with an unmarried mother). The husbands of the widows in this study died unexpectedly at a young age or after a long illness. The divorced mothers were mostly divorced after a turbulent period of conflict. The unmarried mother in this study discovered during her pregnancy that the father of her child was married.

The life stories of these women play a very important role in the value of this research. While the mothers were talking it was possible to discuss their personal experiences, motivations, considerations and choices. This brings more depth, energy and colour into the stories as told by the narrators. Besides the actual story of their lives, their way of portraying their experiences was an additional source of knowledge. A prosopographical approach was used in this study, whereby around different themes “group portraits” of mothers and daughters are formed.

In the nineteen fifties, the importance of the family and the work that women carried out in the home was strongly emphasized. The male breadwinner was the norm and mothers took care of the housework and child rearing. Single mothers as breadwinners and their daughters were a minority. There have been no specific studies carried out for this group.

Divorce was rejected in the fifties, especially when there were young children in the family. Churches were especially opposed to divorce. The separated mothers
in this study were faced with shame and social exclusion. They deviated from the social- and moral norms at that time and were therefore even avoided. The divorced mothers were disappointed and indignant when confronted, but kept those feelings to themselves. They tried to avoid the negative reactions from their environment.

The widows in this study received a lot of support from their environment after the death of their husbands. The social environment interfered sometimes unasked for and the widows now and again felt the need to justify their actions. Sometimes, however, the support they needed was not forthcoming and the widows then openly expressed their indignation.

After the loss of their husbands, the mothers faced a sharp decline in income. This necessitated them taking on their role as breadwinners. Widows had little or no pension and alimony for divorced mothers was usually very low. In the fifties, there was hardly any financial recourse for single mothers with young children. The few mothers who made use of temporary financial assistance experienced this as very humiliating.

The mothers went to work at a time when there was a tight labour market. The work the mothers did ranged from unskilled work, to work for which a secondary or higher level of education was required. The mothers talked about jobs that no longer exist as such. Much work was still done manually, but developments therein also resounded in their life stories.

Literature frequently emphasizes the subordinate position of working women in the nineteen fifties. This study shows that at that time there were also women who resisted this. The mothers were fighting for higher wages, better working conditions or to set limits on their servitude. They found themselves in a lonely position here, without role models in their environment.

It is clear that the mothers in their campaign were guided by their circumstances. When they were in a dependent position, they followed the guidelines of the employer. But when mothers felt less dependent, they tried to do things their own way. They chose emphatically not to behave as a victim and emphasized that they often succeeded in their struggle.

Noteworthy is also how some mothers made their career. They were in that case, one of the first women who occupied a position of leadership. In response to this, they were sometimes faced with opposing forces.

While the mothers were working from an extrinsic motivation, working to earn a living, one can hear in their stories an intrinsic work motivation. The mothers often look back with pride and satisfaction on their time as breadwinners. They usually combine this with the fact that their children have turned out well. Some mothers consider that their time as breadwinners was also an opportunity to develop oneself.
When the mothers were breadwinners, they had to find a solution to combine their work with the care for their children. In the fifties, domestic work was time consuming and there were few facilities for childcare.

In the life stories of the mothers five ways of combining work with caring for their children are presented. Some children were “latchkey children”, others were cared for by family or neighbours. Sometimes there was a babysitter in the home, other mothers organised their work in and around the house. Mothers also brought their children to a nursery or a children’s home. Divorced mothers especially made use of the solution “latchkey child” while widows mostly chose for the solution “work in and around the house”.

The experiences of mothers and daughters with these solutions are very diverse, sometimes mother and daughter have experienced the same solution differently. Regarding the solution “latchkey child”, negative experiences can often be heard. To hear some mothers who opted for the temporary solution of a children’s home, they have also experienced this as being very negative. Regarding the other three solutions, there are both positive, neutral and negative findings to be heard. Often it is not the solution itself, but the personal interpretation of this by the mother that determines the experiences of the daughters.

Lack of time due to the double workload of the mothers echoed throughout many of the life stories of the daughters. However, there are always loving memories attached to activities undertaken by the mothers together with their children. It is also clear that shifting family roles, which the literature warns us of, caused mostly no problems for the daughters. Daughters were also attached to family members who fulfilled a different role than their original family role and regularly have positive memories of this. In contrast, daughters who have had a role in caring for their mother or family have regularly mentioned drawbacks regarding this. But also here it appears that the personal interpretation of this by the mother is determinative.

This study also shows how the daughters, because of the often lengthy absence of their mothers at a young age, were placed in situations where they had to act independently. Their life stories show how their circumstances which they themselves had not chosen, but by which they were formed, led to their early empowerment and very early adulthood.

The loss of the father was a major event in the lives of the daughters in this study. They then grew up in a single-parent family with a mother at the head as breadwinner and were, like their mothers, an exception in their environment.

The death of their father at a young age was also a turning point in their lives. The way in which some of the daughters tell their life stories, such as the absence of chronological order and forgetfulness regarding parts of their life, confirm how significant the loss of their father was. Daughters felt abandoned,
were sometimes faced with separation anxiety or felt unsafe. Feelings of shame and guilt were sometimes interpreted differently than described in the literature. The grief over the loss of their father could affect their whole lives and manifest itself in various ways. Listening to the life stories it becomes clear how time-bound attitudes are regarding dealing with emotions. Because of the taboo on expressing emotion in the fifties, grief might not have been shared in the family. For daughters, this could lead to social isolation in the family.

Daughters of divorced parents often lived through a turbulent time with conflict and tension before the divorce. Indignation regarding the behavior of fathers can regularly be heard. After their father had left the family, the daughters had to reassess their relationships with their parents, in particular the father. Most fathers disappeared into the background and can be described as “divorce-deactivated fathers”. But often there was a special bond between father and daughter, a bond that could evoke some deep emotions. For the girls this could mean that they sometimes had to say goodbye to their fathers twice, when their father left the family and after his death.

The daughters have very different experiences regarding growing up in a family without a father. Daughters were sometimes faced with stigmatization by their environment. Some daughters made a link between growing up in a family with no father and a “soft” attitude to life, but others emphasized that it was because of their father’s absence they had an attitude of independence and self-confidence. Sometimes the girls had problems with authoritarian men or they stressed that the absence of their father led to limitations in the development of their femininity. The life stories make clear above all that the absence of a father in childhood had longstanding consequences.

As children, the daughters were usually deeply involved in the work of their mothers and regularly have detailed memories of her work. Also because of this, their situation was different to that of their contemporaries. The daughters often knew the workplace and colleagues of their mothers and have memories of her work. They emphasized her dedication to her work and frequently stated that their mother was good at her profession. They generally appreciated their working mother and were proud of her.

However, daughters have also negative associations with their mothers being breadwinners. This was reflected when daughters emphasized how hard their mother had to work and when they talked about her fatigue because of her double workload. They regularly stressed the loneliness and lack of sociability in their youth. Sometimes daughters were called upon by their mothers to help with the work. Especially the eldest daughter living at home had to regularly help if the mother’s work was in or about the home. This could hinder opportunities in development for daughters.
Their mothers being breadwinners also affected the later life of the daughters. The daughters had experienced that their mothers were placed in a situation where they had to earn their own living. Daughters kept this in mind in their own lives. Sometimes mothers warned their daughters of this risk.

In addition, the mothers passed the example of financial independence onto their daughters. Many daughters have seen in their childhood that one has to work. In their own lives they want to earn a living themselves and strive to become financially independent.

The mother was also an example of how to combine work and the care for children for many daughters. They had seen that this is possible and did not hesitate to follow their mother’s example in later life. But for some daughters their mother was a negative example. They chose emphatically not to follow in their mother’s footsteps.

In addition to the special position they had in their youth, the lives of the daughters also differ in their later life to those of their contemporaries.

They left school at a relatively young age. Earning money was often the reason for leaving school as the income of the daughters was needed to supplement the family income. Some daughters link this early leaving of school to a feeling of unrest in the family and lack of stimulation. It also happened that some daughters had to leave school to assist their mother with her work.

Unlike national trends at that time, it is apparent that the level of education of the daughters when leaving full-time education was regularly lower than that of their mother. This is especially true for daughters of divorced parents.

The second pattern by which the daughters differ from their contemporaries is regarding learning in later life. Many adult daughters went back to studying and made full use of the increase of adult education in those years. They mainly followed qualifying courses, while their contemporaries followed non-qualifying education. Many daughters thus achieved a significantly higher level of education than when they left full-time education in their childhood.

The young daughters mostly went to work. Most daughters stopped working after the birth of their first child and went back to work later when the children were older. Some daughters kept on working. Sometimes as a working mother with young children they had to deal with resistance.

Just like their mothers the daughters had to combine work with the care for their children. In solutions regarding this they regularly delved into past experiences from their childhood. Some daughters with negative experiences in their childhood years chose not to work as long as the children were small or to arrange their work in such a way that there was always someone home to care for the children. Other daughters, with more or less positive experiences with combining work and care by
their mother, followed the example of their mother or made use of childcare.

The remarkable careers of the daughters is the third pattern in which they differ from their contemporaries. While the literature regarding the employment status of women in the same age group as the daughters stresses that women then had few opportunities of making a career, it is evidenced by the life stories of the daughters that a significant upward trend was often to be seen in their careers.

The fourth pattern in which the daughters differ from their contemporaries is in their relationship pattern - the average age when they married is slightly lower and the frequency of divorce is higher.

Several intergenerational patterns are recognizable in the life stories of the mothers and daughters. Firstly there is the intergenerational pattern of single parenthood which both mothers and daughters told of. The mothers often told about their “forefmothers” that one or two generations ago were also confronted with single parenthood and the breadwinner role.

It is notable how these patterns fulfill a different function in the life stories. Some divorced mothers and the unmarried mother told extensively about these patterns in their family history. It is possible that the intergenerational patterns of single parenthood and the breadwinner role in their family formed a reference for their own divorce. Unlike the divorced mothers, the widows hardly mentioned the intergenerational patterns of single parenthood and the breadwinner role in their family history. They compared their own situation with that of their own widowed mothers and emphasized their worries much more.

The intergenerational pattern of single parenthood is also recognizable in the life stories of the daughters. Relatively many daughters are themselves separated, this is especially true for daughters of divorced parents. The daughters associate relationship problems that led to their divorce with a lack of example in marital roles, the example of single parenthood and the breadwinner role of their mother and a striving for independence.

The second pattern that becomes apparent in the life stories is that regarding paid work. Mothers often made a connection with their own mothers who just like them had to earn a living. The intergenerational pattern of the breadwinner role is also discernible with the daughters. After their divorces all daughters went on to earn a living themselves, while at that time divorced mothers with young children often became “welfare mothers”. In their childhood they had experienced that paid work and care for children can be combined. When they divorced they chose to earn a living themselves.

The third intergenerational pattern becomes visible in the attitude and values that pass from mother to daughter. The values of the mothers can be described as extrinsic or instrumental, self-oriented values. These are values aimed at survival,
while their contemporaries wanted to pass primarily intrinsic, non-instrumental and altruistic, other-oriented values on to their children. The values that the mothers emphasized, clearly differ from those of their contemporaries.

After the loss of their husbands, the mothers managed resiliently to shape their lives. They have experienced that setbacks can be overcome and have passed this on to their children. This resilience also featured in the lives of the daughters when they were confronted with setbacks.

This study also shows that patterns can be broken. Compared with the mothers, the daughters remarried more often after divorcing their first husband. They were also more active in maintaining the contact between their children and the father of their children after divorce. And many daughters emphasized the importance of studying at a young age to their children. It also shows how the social climate towards single parenthood and the breadwinner role has changed. While the mothers were faced with social constraints, this was almost never the case with the daughters.

The life stories regularly have agency. Mothers and daughters did not feel victims of circumstance, but are very clear in how they shaped their own lives. The life stories of mothers shows how, after the loss of their husbands, their resilience to life shaped itself. They were not deterred by the social standards for mothers with young children, but were the breadwinners of their families and combined with varying degrees of success their work with caring for their children. This study also shows how the negative consequences of the loss of the father were mostly repaired in the long run. Many girls recognized and exploited second chances as they arose and had the benefit of this in later life.