

**Various States of Commodification: Recent shifts in policies directed at lone mothers in the US and Germany after unification**

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## **Introduction**

All modern welfare states are constrained by budgetary pressures. Evidence from Europe and the US, however, indicates that there has been a shift of financial resources toward families. An increase in spending on family policy was observed in Germany (Bleses/Rose 1998), and in the US, rising resources are directed towards low income families (Orloff 2000). Within different social contexts and given differences in budget priorities, these policies generate different incentives for labor market behavior, especially for lone mothers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which this shift of resources toward families is related to the labor market status (and marital status) of mothers differentiates welfare states around the world. For example, recent changes in welfare policy in the US impose work requirements and lifetime limits on welfare recipients, and the earned income tax credit (EITC) erects costly incentives to encourage an increase of labor market participation of lone mothers. In contrast, in Germany a particular combination of benefits is offered to lone mothers that provides financial resources above the economic minimum of welfare benefit and so indirectly encourages labor market abstinence for a limited time period of care.

In order to analyze these policy shifts, we will draw on Esping-Andersen's concept of commodification as well as on its feminist critics and their conceptualization of welfare states (II). A comparative analysis of different policy regimes with respect to lone mothers in the US, East and West-Germany before and after unification contextualizes this analysis (III). Based on the theory and evidence, we will show that the most generalized level of commodification of lone mothers, in the sense of full time labor market participation, existed in the former DDR. Due to the particular provision of childcare, we will call this policy regime towards lone mothers one that "enabled commodification" of all mothers, and equalized the situation of lone mothers.

In West-Germany, until recently, the established policy regime was dominated by a "strong voluntary commodification," particularly of lone mothers. This means that lone mothers rarely took advantage of their entitlement to welfare benefits without requirements to take up work until a certain age of the children. They preferred state independence through labor market participation to reliance on welfare payments for support. In contrast, the US welfare policy can be characterized up to the mid-1990s

by a greater degree of “pre-commodification” and state dependence accepted by many lone mothers. By the late 1980’s welfare policy increasingly expected poor lone mothers to work outside the home, but did not require that of married women. As a result, many women either “combined” welfare benefits with work, or “cycled” between the two in order to make ends meet.

Recent policy reforms in the US, however, have lead to an “enforced commodification” of lone mothers, caused by the “workfare” policies associated with welfare reform. What worsens the situation for lone mothers is that the job opportunities available to women moving from welfare-to-work have not lead to economic independence or future de-commodification. In contrast, the reunited Germany is characterized by a policy that contains a reduction of relative privileges of lone mothers in employment combined with a general improvement of social rights for homecarers, including lone mothers. The shift in policy has been followed by some reduction of labor market participation of lone mothers in the so-called “new Lander,” but can, nevertheless, be described as “strong voluntary commodification,” particularly among lone mothers (II).

We observe an increase in the labor force participation of lone mothers in Germany and the US although within the context of different conditions. Whereas labor force participation in Germany mainly offers independence from welfare payments and also future access to de-commodification (including the rights to pensions), the EITC and related programs in the US in many cases offer access only to precarious, low-wage jobs that maintain present - and possibly future - welfare dependence. These case studies give rise to the conclusion that commodification, which offered access to de-commodification (including enabling policies) can provide an incentive to participate in the labor force that is equal to—or even bigger than—the enforcement of labor market participation by workfare policies (IV).

## **II. Theoretical Background**

In *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Esping-Andersen (1990) developed a typology of welfare state regimes based on the concept of commodification, and respectively different policy regimes of de-commodification. The level of “commodification” in any given policy regime indicates the degree to

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will interchange the terms “lone mothers” and “single mothers” when discussing unmarried mothers.

which individuals must be attached to the labor market in order to attain an adequate standard of living. The degree of de-commodification of labor is closely connected to the distribution and institutionalization of political power due to the influence of "conservative", "liberal" or "social democratic" ideas and party governments. In the US, de-commodification is generally low or at most moderate.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, de-commodification is high, but very much related to the proven record of strong labor force attachment or strong familial obligations. In contrast, in Sweden, a more or less universal social citizenship was established to provide minimal social rights independent of labor market attachment. In that sense, the US is an example of the ideal liberal welfare-state, whereas Germany could be classified as conservative-corporatist, and Sweden as social-democratic (Esping-Andersen 1990:53f).

The idea behind the concepts of commodification and de-commodification is that the development of modern capitalism transferred "labor" into a commodity so that income and survival depended on labor market participation. This ended the somehow pre-commodified status of people where survival and social welfare was provided not by the labor contract but by the family, community, or the church. Workers, however, are a unique commodity for several reasons. First, they must survive and reproduce both themselves and the society in which they live. Second, their market power can be destroyed by illness or the business cycle and so on. Therefore, pressures for the de-commodification of labor evolved, that are reflected in a variety of welfare-state policies enacted to protect labor from the vagaries of the free market. In that sense de-commodification is defined as "the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation" (Esping-Andersen 1990:37).

The concept of de-commodification provoked many feminist critiques. These critics argued that a precondition of de-commodification was commodification. Therefore, the whole typology of welfare states was based on a concept that was only partly applicable to women and the measurement of their welfare. Other welfare state typologies were designed that showed the "strength" of the male breadwinner model in welfare state institutions (Lewis/Ostner 1994; Sainsbury 1994,1996). The new typologies showed that welfare state institutions offered married women as "homecarers" a kind of "pre-commodified" status including derived social rights in pension and health systems (defined by their husbands' labour market

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<sup>2</sup> This is particularly at issue given the expected bankruptcy of the Social Security system in 2037.

position and record). Under this model, Germany was characterized as a very strong male breadwinner model, whereas the US was characterized by the workfarism model.

"Lone mothers" are a unique case to be integrated into this typology, because they lack the requisite male breadwinner. Absent a male breadwinner, lone mothers do not have access to a "pre-commodified" status. With respect to lone mothers, state policies can be distinguished by the degree to which the state offered policies to substitute the male breadwinner to what extent the discourse surrounding such policies focused on lone mothers' situation as a "moral failure."<sup>3</sup>

For the following analysis, however, we will not draw primarily on welfare state typologies. Our concern is to call attention to the different "states" of commodification of lone mothers in the US and Germany, and how these states influence the labor market participation rates of lone mothers. Furthermore very different levels of social protection following labor market participation (as rights to de-commodification) can be distinguished. It is our hypothesis that, in spite of labor market participation rates becoming increasingly similar in the two countries, that the changes in labor force participation rates among lone mothers are based on very different policies and incentive structures that are related to the states of commodification and de-commodification in each country.

In order to characterize a country's degree of commodification, incentive structures that "enable" or "enforce" labor market participation must be distinguished. "Enabling" structures are designed to equalize the supply and coverage of childcare facilities, as well as the financial support during a defined period of leave for childcare and the right to return to a certain employment. Such policies aim to equalize the situation of lone mothers to that of all adults in the logic of the adult worker model.

In contrast, "enforcing" structures are characterized by work requirements in exchange for welfare benefits as well as the eventual the withdrawal of welfare benefits entirely, in the logic of a workfare system. Such policies do not aim at equalizing the position of lone mothers in terms of providing opportunities to care for their (young) children themselves or to equalize their situation with married mothers in the logic of the male breadwinner model. This is mostly accomplished by a lack of childcare facilities or their privatization, because childcare services are generally not or just marginally developed in a male-breadwinner welfare state.

Striking differences can also be seen between the two countries in the way in which the labor market participation of lone mothers offers access to “de-commodification” in form of unemployment benefits, pensions and/or health care. Policies based on the principle of the adult worker model (as in the former East Germany) regard lone mothers as workers and give them more or less the same rights and protection to all workers. Policies based on the principle of the male breadwinner model (as in the former West Germany) regard lone mothers—as all mothers—as being primarily responsible for childcare. However, without a real male breadwinner, the consequence—if the caring role is accepted—is lifelong welfare dependence. In this case, the incentive to work is to escape life-long welfare dependence, but the labor market participation can still be considered to be "voluntarily."

The policies based on the principle of workfare (as in the US), however, do not extend the same rights and protection to all workers equally, forcing lone mothers into the labor market in exchange for government benefits. Such political strategies may acknowledge that many lone mothers in this situation have little or no education and experience, and therefore access only to low-paid employment. As a result, the policies may include some training and income transfers for childcare. Effectively, however, these benefits do little to help these women escape poverty in any permanent way. Within the context of insecure, minimum-wage employment without access to full social rights including health care or old age pension, the chance of permanent welfare independence is particularly rare for lone mothers. Low quality and precarious childcare arrangements exacerbate lone mother’s ability to succeed in the labor market and limit their ability to attain economic independence. Therefore, the workfare system suggests a massive degree of underprotection—especially for lone mothers. The following sections employ these three categories of "different states of commodification" to analyze the policies directed at lone mothers in East and West-Germany before unification and in the US prior to 1990 as well as recent policy reforms.

## **I. East Germany, West Germany and the US Pre 1990**

### **A. East Germany: Pre Unification**

The political and public discourse concerning lone mothers in East Germany prior to the transition focused on the picture of lone mothers as “super women”(Klett-Davies 1997, quoted in Schwarz and Mieder 1993).

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<sup>3</sup> Note that widows' rights were always defined in other terms than those of unmarried or divorced mothers.

The preferably complete labor market participation of women was not only economically desirable from the perspective of the State,<sup>4</sup> it was also aspired to by the families themselves. Due to the low level of average incomes, a second earner was necessary to reach a reasonable standard of living. The aim of GDR's family policy focused on the realization of continuous full-time employment among all women, including single mothers. Lone mothers, however, did enjoy different privileges, including even the detachment of the birth of the first child of a couple and their marriage. Births out of wedlock were not stigmatized and were widespread. More than one third of all children were born outside marriage in 1986 (Gysi 1989), and marriage was less a social institution than an individual symbol of commitment (Ostner/Bast 1992).

Although a high rate of female labor force participation had been a goal of the state since the beginning of the GDR, policies enabling mothers to work outside of the home were only introduced by the 1970s. The impetus of such 'family-friendly' policies was a declining birth rate and subsequent fear of a future labor shortage. In response, extensive pronatalist policies were introduced in the 1970s and expanded in the mid-1980s with the goal of rising the birth rates without declining female labor market participation (Niepel 1994, Trappe 1995). As a result of these policies both education and experience levels of men and women became more similar.

One major pronatalist policy introduced was public child care facilities. By 1985 kindergarten was available for 100% of children between the age of 3 and 6 (Helwig 1987 : 101). Places in creches for children under the age of three was available to about 80% (Klett-Davies 1997) and 85% of school children from first to fourth grade had places in (before-and-) after-school care centers. The generous opening hours of child care facilities (from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.) were prescribed by law (Helwig 1987 : 101). In addition to these, there were weekly creches for children of shift workers. School children could spend their school vacation in camps. Public child care was free, and parents paid only a minimal amount for meals.

Children of single mothers were preferentially placed in crèches. If no place in a crèches was available, single mothers received so-called "mother support" (Mütterunterstützung). This was the only opportunity for mothers to take care of their children themselves state-aided. Until 1986 only single mothers got benefits, if they had to stay at home with a sick child (Gysi 1989). Later also married mothers

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<sup>4</sup> Low productivity during Communism caused a permanent labor shortage.

with at least two children were enabled for that support, single mothers already with one child. Since 1986 mothers could get one year paid release from work when they got a baby (ebd.). At first, only single mothers could receive benefits during that time, later married mothers as well. In the late 80s, the state of the GDR paid about 80 per cent of the costs of children, directly or indirectly (Ostner 1997 :39).

Due to the extremely high labor market participation of women in the GDR we conclude that almost all lone mothers were employed in the labor force. By 1988, 89% of single mothers were working fulltime (Walther 1992). Women in the GDR were not only much more likely to be employed than in West Germany (over 90% to 60%) (DIW-WB 41/90), they also worked longer hours, were much more likely to work fulltime and had less and shorter career breaks (ebd., Trappe 1995). That was also true for lone mothers.

As a result of these high labor market participation rates, poverty was rare. However, households of lone parents averaged lower per capita income than "complete" families. But the difference in income between single and two-parent-families was smaller in comparison the difference in West Germany: single parents in the GDR had on average 81% of the per capita income of two-parent-families at their disposal, single parents in the FRG only 75% on average (Frick et.al. 1990). Single parents in the GDR were much less likely to fall into poverty than single parents in the FRG: 5.7% fell under the 40%-poverty line (FRG: 39.4%), 23% under the 50%-povertyline (FRG: 53%) and 50.2% under the 60%-poverty line (FRG: 68.1). However, we have to take into account, that these poverty lines are related to the income situation in the respective country. Because of the much more equal income distribution were the poverty rates in the GDR generally very low. If we consider the poverty rates of lone parents in relation to two-parent-families of the same country, we see that single parents had a much higher risk to fall into poverty than two-parent-families in both parts of Germany.

We conclude that the former GDR exhibited a highly generalized commodification of all mothers (including and especially supporting lone mothers), in the sense that full- time labor market participation among all women, including lone mothers existed. Due to the particular provision of child care and financial support during a defined period of leave for childcare and the right to return to a certain employment, we can call this policy regime towards lone mothers one that "enabled" commodification of all mothers and equalized the situation of lone mothers.

## **B . West Germany: Pre Unification**

A political or public discourse on single mothers was almost non-existent in Germany during the 1980s. Single parents were considered as “incomplete families”. Cultural norms expected mothers of children under the age of three stay at home to take care of the child (Ostner 1997). Mothers of older children were expected to work only part-time.

Most policies for single mothers mirrored these social norms. Lone mothers faced various problems in their attempt to attain and retain employment: a lack of child-care facilities, low incomes, inflexible working hours and so on (Klett-Davies 1997). Single mothers were politically encouraged to stay at home with their younger children, to keep absent from the labor market and to rely on social transfers.

The system of transfers was (and is) organized with a strong incentive to stay at home with a child for its first three years. Child rearing benefits are one of the very few income sources that can be received in addition to social assistance. Due to the possibility of combining social assistance and child rearing benefits, single mothers were able to reach a standard of living above the poverty level. Also single mothers of older children were not forced into the labor market. They could receive social assistance without serious work requirements. Being on social assistance for single mothers with small children was not socially stigmatized (Ostner 1997).

In contrast to the described policy regime, most single mothers worked, and they worked full-time. Single mothers were more likely to be in paid employment than either married or cohabiting mothers (Klett-Davies 1997). About 57% of them worked full-time in 1988 (Walther 1992, see also Holst/Schupp 1990). Although families headed by single mothers are much more likely to rely on social assistance than other families, they depend only temporarily on these benefits (Voges/Ostner 1995).

In summary, the policy regime in West Germany did not include strategies to commodify single mothers – neither enabling nor enforcing. They even were strongly encouraged to keep away from the labor market. Regardless of that, most single mothers worked. Therefore, the policy regime in West Germany before unification was characterized by a “strong voluntary” commodification, particularly of lone mothers. Due to social norms regarding work and motherhood, lone mothers rarely took advantage of the relatively generous entitlements to welfare benefits provided by the state. Despite various obstacles, lone mothers combined paid and caring work.

### **C. US: Pre Welfare Reform**

Political and public discourse around the US welfare system has always been contentious, and particularly derisive attitudes notoriously focus on marital and racial divides among mothers relying on state transfers. Social norms based on the “Protestant work ethic” as well as on moral codes of “out-of wedlock” births blame lone women for their poverty and prescribe work and personal responsibility as the only acceptable manner in which to escape poverty.<sup>5</sup> Within this institutional context, policy makers have pursued welfare reform since its conception. In this way, although welfare benefits provided lone mothers with a level of income outside of the labor force, they were not entirely pre-commodified as such benefits often came with expectations that they were either temporary or were received in exchange for market participation rather than as an individual entitlement.

The “Great Society” of Lyndon Johnson extended Roosevelt’s social safety net for the poor in the US in the early 1970s. Lone mothers could access means-tested benefits including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Women Infants and Children (WIC), as well as subsidized healthcare and housing. Further, benefits declined to the extent that women had access to certain assets or participated in the labor force. “Mothers avoid better paid official labor because they fear losing welfare and health-care benefits (Hobson 1995).

By the late 1980s, however, the rhetoric of workfare (especially concerning lone mothers) was completely inscribed in the US welfare system. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 strengthened existing work provisions by requiring some recipients to work in exchange for the receipt of

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<sup>5</sup> Note that poor married mothers in the US do not face the same social contempt as poor lone mothers.

benefits (Mink 1998: 41). The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 included the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills program that “specifically conditioned welfare eligibility on the single mother’s participation in work, education, or employment-related training programs” (Mink 1998: 41). The FSA did, however provide childcare to enable mothers of young children to participate in these activities as well as a one-year transitional child-care benefit to those leaving the welfare roles.

While the FSA did recognize that lone mothers needed education, training, and child care in order to be able to move out of welfare, the Act did not treat married mothers and lone mothers alike. “The FSA did not expect married mothers to earn their own wages, for example, as it exempted one parent in two-parent families from participation in the mandatory work program unless states opted to require it from the second parent” (Mink 1998: 42). Additionally, the FSA did not address the labor market inequalities that left the majority of lone mothers in poverty by 1994 (Mink 1998). “Hence, even as the FAS told poor single mothers to get a job, it did not provide the means for them to achieve economic independence through a job” (Mink, 1998: 42). In order to make ends meet, many lone mothers either combined welfare and work, or cycled between the two (Spalter-Roth, Hartmann and Andrews 1992). On the eve of welfare reform in the US, then, lone women were somewhat pre-commodified in their ability to access welfare benefits without participating in the labor force.

#### **IV. Unified Germany and the US Post 1990**

##### **A. Unified Germany**

Single mothers in the new Länder have not changed their attitudes towards the simultaneous connection of employment and motherhood (Trappe 1995, Klett-Davies 1997). However, there has been some decline in single mother’s labor force participation since 1989. This decline is due not to mother’s attitudes toward attaining a pre-commodified status, but rather to the disastrous labor market situation in the East. In the GDR, most costs of children were socialized and mothers in the East still expect that kind of political support (Trappe 1995). Women in post-unification East Germany face the political goal of families with a male breadwinner and a part time working wife. In other words, the social security of women as connected to the employment of their husbands or the state as a husband-substitute. The

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“If there is an expectation imposed on married mothers, it is rather that they should choose care-giving over wage-earning, if they can afford at all to make that choice” (Mink, 1998: 120).

simultaneous participation in family and labor work is discouraged by the German tax and pension system. In addition to this, public child care can not longer be taken for granted. There are fewer places in child care facilities available (even if the coverage is still much higher than in West Germany), they are not longer free of charge and open as many hours as in GDR.

However, the new policies like Erziehungsgeld (child rearing benefits), Erziehungsurlaub (parental leave) and Sozialhilfe (social assistance) may have contributed to the declining employment. Now single mothers at least have the opportunity to stay at home with their child(ren) (Klett-Davies 1997). Mothers in the GDR never had this choice. Single mothers in social assistance (Sozialhilfe) have no obligation to work as long as their youngest child is under the age of three. After this, they only have to work, if adequate care for their children is warranted („angemessene Betreuung der Kinder ist gewährleistet“) (Bundessozialhilfegesetz 1998). In most cases, single mothers are not seriously expected to work until their children are about 12 years old. In the first three years the incentive to stay at home is strongest – and that is politically absolutely desired. During this time, single mothers can combine social assistance and child rearing benefits – that way they might reach a similar level of income as working women in low income groups. Although there is a tendency to more commodification of recipients of social assistance – that does not apply for (single or married) mothers of young children.

Despite strong incentives to stay at home – most single mothers work. Labor market participation of women and mothers is still substantially higher in East Germany than in West Germany. But whereas single mothers in West Germany have a higher labour market participation than married mothers, it is the contrary in East Germany (see table). Whether these differences result from labor market stigmatisation against single mothers or their decision to use the opportunities to stay at home take care for their children themselves remains a question for further research (Klett-Davies 1997). Empirical evidence suggests that single mothers have been hit harder by the rising unemployment and cuts in child care than married mothers (Statistisches Bundesamt, Mikrozensus 1994 and 1998).

The labor market participation of West German mothers is increasing, while labor market participation of East German mothers is decreasing (Statistisches Bundesamt, Mikrozensus 1994 and 1998). When we consider not only the employed, but also unemployed mothers, we see that almost all mothers, except those with children under the age of three, wish to be in employment. Single mothers in

the new Länder are twice as likely to work full-time than single mothers in the old Länder (Klett-Davies 1997).

So, the reunited Germany is characterized by a policy that contains a reduction of relative privileges of lone mothers in employment combined with a general improvement of social rights for homecarers, including lone mothers. We do not know yet if the reduction of labor market participation of lone mothers has been caused by the described policy shifts or by the disastrous labor market situation including the worse supply of child care. Nevertheless, the united Germany nevertheless can be described as a continuity of “strong 'oluntary” commodification particularly of lone mothers.

### **B. Post-Welfare Reform US**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed in 1996 introduced dramatic differences in the welfare provisioning in the US. This Act culminated decades of reform geared toward eliminating the entitlement nature of welfare which, in public opinion, had come to be associated with morally inferior black women either too lazy or incapable of keeping a job, a husband, or both. Whereas AFDC contained expectations about work requirements, POWORA made work requirements a legal obligation.

The new “tough love” welfare policy instituted mandatory work requirements,<sup>6</sup> and state discretion of the allocation of benefits (as long as they don’t exceed federal limits). Work provisions require “solo caregivers” to perform community service after two months of receiving benefits. After two years of benefits, the hours-requirement increase to twenty hours/per week and 30 hours after three years, and ultimately a five year lifetime limit for welfare participation.<sup>7</sup> These requirements were enacted in conjunction with the earned income tax credit (EITC) which provides progressive tax credits up to approximately thirty thousand dollars in income solidifies the policy’s goal of forcing single mothers into the labor market (Elwood, 1988). Hence the slogan “welfare-to-work”. “Welfare law thus activates

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<sup>6</sup> The work requirements included either work for wages or volunteer work. According to Mink (1998: 109) “unremunerated participation in a community service program counts as work activity.” Although the requirements differ across states, some states (including New York, Massachusetts, California, Florida, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin) compelled mothers to work outside of the home immediately upon receipt of benefits” (Mink, 1998: 62).

<sup>7</sup> The Federal “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families” (TANF) limits receipt of aid to a maximum of 24 months, or two years, at any one time and a lifetime limit of 60 months, or five years (Rose, 2000).

constitutionally significant distinctions among mothers who need welfare and between such mothers and other citizens—distinctions that enforce inequality” (Mink, 1998: 75).

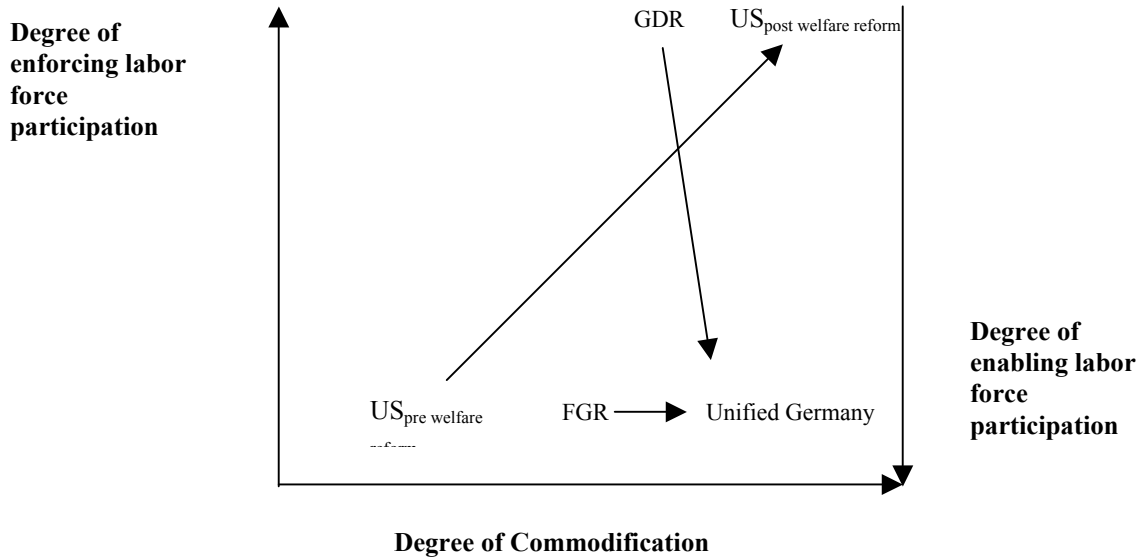
Gary Burtless (quoted in the Washington Post, 2000) showed that single mothers make up the largest component of recent increases in labor force participation rates. The percentage of single mothers in the labor market increased from 58.4 in 1994 to 71.5 in 1999. Burtless ascribes the increase to welfare reform, the EITC, and to tight labor markets. Thus, the welfare reform enforces full commodification of lone mothers, providing ultimately no social support outside of the labor market.

One of the main problems with work requirements and the eventual elimination of welfare benefits to lone mothers is that these provisions do not necessarily lead to true economic independents. Poor women in the US have little or no education and experience and as a result are placed into low-wage jobs such as clerical work, retail sales, food service and cleaning. “These jobs are among the most likely to pay subminimum wages: in 1990 dollars, food service jobs paid an average of \$3.75 per hour, sales paid \$3.94, and cleaning paid \$4.08” (Mink, 1998: 112). These jobs are generally not full-time, and even if they were full time and at the minimum wage, they are not sufficient to support a family. “After child care expenses, a single mother working full-time at minimum wage will bring home a net annual income of \$7,972” (Mink, 1998: 114). Among families in which women are the sole providers 60 percent are below the poverty level (Mink, 1998: 106). Thus, not only are lone mothers experiencing forced commodification, the possibility of future de-commodification is slight.

## **V. Conclusions**

Various states of commodification have characterized the US, East, West and the Unified Germany over time. This essay examined the status of lone mothers within the Esping-Anderson classification and their rates of labor force participation within different political and social contexts. The case studies examined not only changes in labor force participation rates and degrees of commodification in Germany in the US across large political changes, but also the degree to which the policies enforced or enabled labor force participation among lone mothers. Figure 1 depicts the various degrees of commodification and enforcement/enablement of labor force participation of lone mothers in Germany and in the US as well as changes in these statuses over time.

**Figure 1: The Labor Force Participation Status of Lone Mothers in the US and Germany: Degrees of Commodification, Enforcement and Enabling**



The unification in Germany brought together the most generalized level of commodification in East Germany that instituted policies designed to enable lone mothers' participation in the labor force, with that of voluntary commodification in West Germany. Policy reforms in the US changed from nearly completely pre-commodifying lone mothers to enforcing their full commodification status. Welfare reform in the US led to almost complete commodification of lone mothers and provided little or no possibility of future de-commodification. Further, such policy changes did not alleviate poverty levels among this extremely vulnerable group. Labor force participation among single women, not surprisingly, have increased since the policy was implemented in 1996.

The increase in labor force participation among lone mothers in Germany and the US occurred within completely different contexts. While labor force participation in Germany offers independence from welfare payments and also future access to de-commodification, the welfare programs in the US require lone mothers to move off of welfare rolls into precarious, low-wage employment with little opportunity to escape poverty. These case studies give rise to the conclusion that commodification coupled with access to future de-commodification upon retirement can provide an incentive to participate in the labor force that is

equal to—or even greater than than—the enforcement of labor market participation by workfare policies that enforce participation and provide no real protection from poverty.

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