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The Issue of Never-Married Motherhood in Britain, 1920–70

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SUMMARY

This article examines shifts in attitudes and changes in provision with regard to never-married mothers within three broad chronological periods. The first section considers attitudes towards these mothers in the period 1918–45, when the issue was conceptualized as one of public health and moral welfare. Second, the article examines the period between 1945 and 1970,

when the dominant professional view of never-married mothers focused on identifying individual pathology, but when significant continuities in treatment can nevertheless be found. Third, the article looks briefly at the substantial change in policy and provision for what were then called 'one-parent families' during the 1970s. In conclusion it argues that while there were substantial changes in terms of the way in which unmarried motherhood was defined, from the point of view of the unmarried mothers themselves the continuities have been more striking. Unmarried mothers have been persistently singled out and labelled a social problem and, in all but a brief period during the late 1960s and 1970s, also as a moral problem.

Keywords: [unmarried mother](#), [lone parent](#), [never-married mother](#), [illegitimacy](#), [public](#), [health](#), [social work](#), [welfare](#), [mother and baby home](#)

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