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Understanding economic inactivity and NEET status among young women in the UK and France

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the position of young women in the UK and France who are defined as not in education, employment or training (NEET) and economically inactive (EI). While the challenges facing the young unemployed are well documented, far less is known about economic inactivity and its propensity to impact to a much greater extent on the lives of young women. The UK and France share some similarities with regard to their NEET EI female populations, in terms of the relative size of the group and the barriers young women face, despite being exposed to very different types of policy intervention and welfare support. Drawing on quantitative evidence (via the *Céreq*) from France and a recent qualitative study in England, the paper provides a deeper understanding of the characteristics and trajectories of young women who are NEET and EI. It highlights a need for policy interventions beyond employability initiatives: policies which tackle the barriers that young women, especially young mothers, face in accessing employment, as well as their difficulties in securing good quality and sustainable employment.

KEYWORDS

NEET; young women; economic inactivity; comparative analysis; France; United Kingdom

Introduction

This article examines the position of young women in the UK and France who are defined as not in education, employment or training (NEET) and economically inactive (EI), in order to ascertain how these terms have been applied to young people and, crucially, how this impacts on their trajectories into adulthood. Historically, EI status has been accorded to considerably higher numbers of young women (than young men), because of their much greater propensity to assume childcare responsibilities following motherhood. NEET EI status among young people is examined in both countries in terms of numbers, trends, length of time out of the labour market and re-engagement with education, employment or training (EET).

France and the UK share some similarities with regard to their NEET EI female populations. For example, in 2017, both countries had a similar rate of young women who were NEET and EI, which stood at approximately 10% of all 15–29-year-olds (OECD 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this paper, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, is to highlight the similar barriers faced by young women defined in this category and the economic and social exclusion that they experience in both the UK and France, despite different policy initiatives existing in the two countries. Barriers include living in low-income households with limited financial resources and sparse opportunity structures, which lock many young women into long-term NEET EI status. We also examine what policy initiatives have been applied in each country and what are needed to address the challenges faced by young women who are NEET and EI. In conclusion, we argue that a much broader range of

measures, beyond active labour market policies (ALMPs) is needed to tackle the additional obstacles experienced by young people who are NEET and EI, in comparison to their counterparts within the youth unemployment (and NEET) statistics.

NEET and EI status – an overview

Over the last twenty years, the term ‘NEET’ has been utilised internationally to classify an increasingly widening age cohort of young people who are not participating in education, employment or training, with age definitions varying between specific countries (House of Lords 2014). Coupled with a broader age spectrum, in most contexts, the NEET group comprises the unemployed or ‘available for work’ group, as well as the young people who are EI and unavailable for work, primarily because of family responsibilities, sickness or disability (Maguire 2018). Also, while the average NEET rate among OECD countries stands at 13%, there is substantial variation between individual countries. For example, in Turkey, the NEET rate stands at 26.5% in 2018, while it is 9.2% among 15–29-year-olds in Germany. NEET rates are generally higher in Southern European countries, such as Italy, Greece and Spain, and lower in a combination of Northern and Central European countries such as Germany, Austria and Scandinavia (OECD 2019). While economic circumstances are a key factor in determining NEET rates, one reason for the disparity between countries in quantifying and qualifying their NEET statistics is that worldwide, unlike for unemployment or employment, there is no international standard definition of NEETs (ILO (International Labour Organization) 2013).

Between 2000 and 2017, overall NEET rates were higher in France in comparison to the UK. In 2017, the NEET rate in France remained high at 16.5% of 15–29-year-olds, while in the UK the NEET rate had declined to 12.2% (OECD 2020; Table 1).¹ In France, between 2000 and 2017, unemployment rates within the NEET group were higher than in the UK, while the reverse was true in relation to NEET EI rates. However, more recently, NEET EI rates increased to 8% of 15–29-year-olds in France in 2017, compared to 7.5% in the UK, which makes them broadly the same.

Following international trends, young women in both France and the UK have a much greater propensity to be economically inactive (EI), whilst young men are more likely to have unemployed status within the NEET group. Table 1 shows that in both 2000 and 2010, while the UK had a higher percentage of young women in the NEET EI group in comparison to France, by 2017 both countries had a rate of approximately 10% of 15–29-year-olds. In summary, by 2017 the UK and France had similar rates of young people who were NEET and EI, as well as comparable rates of young women in the NEET EI category.

Table 1. NEETs rate among young people 15–29-year-olds (in %).

	2000		2010		2017	
	UK	France	UK	France	UK	France
All NEET	13.3	15.0	15.9	16.6	12.2	16.5
Economic Inactivity	8.5	7.0	9.0	7.3	7.5	8.0
Unemployment	4.9	8.0	6.9	9.3	4.6	8.5
Men NEET	9.5	11.5	13.6	15.2	10.5	15.3
Economic Inactivity	3.6	3.8	4.8	4.6	4.9	6.9
Unemployment	5.9	7.7	8.8	10.6	5.6	9.4
Women NEET	17.3	18.5	18.3	18.0	14.0	17.8
Economic Inactivity	13.5	10.3	13.4	10.0	10.3	10.1
Unemployment	3.8	8.2	4.9	8.0	3.7	7.7

Source: OECD 2020.

Note: This indicator presents the share of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), as a percentage of the total number of young people in the corresponding age group, by gender. In 2017, the UK had 10% of young women in the NEET Economically Inactive group.

While Eurofound (2016, 36) estimated that the UK and France had similar NEET rates in 2014 (13.4% and 13.5% respectively), the largest group in both countries comprised young people who were short-term unemployed. Differences did emerge between the two countries with regard to the prevalence of, and reasons for NEET EI status. The second largest group in the UK comprised young people who were unable to participate in the labour market due to family responsibilities (30.2%), compared with a much smaller percentage in France (13.4%). However, in France, there was a higher percentage of young people who were NEET for unspecified reasons (16.5%), compared with the UK (8%). This may disguise the reasons for NEET EI status and, specifically, young people assuming family/caring responsibilities. Also, in France there was a much higher percentage of young people who were NEET due to illness and disability (11.6% compared with 6% in the UK), which has been found to mask responsibilities for caring for other family members.

Female NEET EI is overwhelmingly linked to 'caring' responsibilities, whether this be child or elder care and/or other domestic/family responsibilities and in some countries, is due to cultural expectation (Bardak, Maseda, and Rosso 2015). Assaad and Levison (2013) argued that inadequate international labour market demand for young people invariably leads to young women being more likely to be found doing non-labour force work and less likely to report themselves as actively seeking work. This finding is endorsed by Mosca (2014), who asserted that, while more young women were NEET across EU states, in comparison to young men, it was the male NEET/unemployment rate that rose more rapidly as a result of the post-2008 economic crisis. This is attributable to greater numbers of young men registering with statutory services as being available and/or actively seeking work and to the inclination of young women to assume caring or domestic responsibilities as an alternative to registered unemployment (Assaad and Levison).

While there is a wealth of literature on the impact of unemployment on young people's lives, specifically its scarring effects and the long-term impact of economic and social exclusion (Gregg and Tominey 2005; Bell and Blanchflower 2011; ACEVO (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations) 2012), less evidence exists on the consequences of experiencing economic inactivity at an early age and its concomitant effects (Franzén and Kassman 2005). Scott et al. found that prolonged economic inactivity had profound effects on mental health, with the risks of depression, alcohol or substance misuse and suicidal attempts being significantly increased in economically inactive young people compared to their economically active peers (Scott et al. 2013).

Some theoretical context provides an overview of how youth transitions to the labour market are underpinned by disadvantage, due to young people's lack of work-place skills, experience and opportunity structures.

Theoretical overview

There have been a number theoretical arguments and approaches put forward to rationalise young people's disadvantaged position in the labour market and their propensity to experience unemployment and precarious work, which largely hinge on their lack of skills and work experience as the precursor for their vulnerability, together with diminishing or vanished opportunity structures in the labour market to support them. These include:

- *the segmentation theory* (Piore 1978), which places young people in a secondary labour market characterised by labour market insecurity and poor social protection;
- *the vulnerability approach* (Castel 1995; Becquet 2012; Martin 2013), which asserts that certain groups (especially young people) in society of risk are susceptible to marginality due to precarious work, long-term unemployment and the weakness of relations (social and family networks);

- *the structural hypothesis*, which maintains that changing economic conditions, most notably deindustrialisation, has permanently weakened the structure of opportunities available to young people in the labour market (Roberts, Dench, and Richardson 1986; Ashton and Maguire 1983; Roberts 2009), and
- *the labour queue hypothesis* (Thurow 1975; Main and Raffe 1983; Main 1985; Raffe 1986; Reskin and Roos 1990), which argues that young workers are particularly vulnerable to any changes in the levels of unemployment and employment because of their precarious position in the 'labour queue', due to their limited skills and labour market experience. Proponents of this hypothesis maintain that these changes are not permanent and could be reversed by policies aimed at stimulating economic activity.

In all of these debates, discussion rests on young people's relationship with the labour market, i.e. their unemployment or underemployment, and an underpinning assumption that all young people are willing and able to be labour market participants if their skills 'deficiencies' can be fixed and their opportunity structures within the labour market are improved. Far less discussion has taken place to recognise that some groups of young people face additional barriers, such as young parenthood or health problems. This places these groups beyond immediate unemployment or underemployment status and into early experiences of economic inactivity and its propensity to lead to long-term social and economic exclusion. Underclass theorists, such as Murray (1994), have argued that generous welfare support systems help to encourage economic inactivity among some groups in society, in particular single young mothers, by the offer of housing and financial incentives to remain workless. However, recent evidence from the UK does not endorse this position. It highlighted the impact of recent austerity measures on welfare support, which have served to increase the risk of young mothers and their children living in poverty (Maguire 2018).

The next sections explore how NEET EI status persists within the context of the social, labour market and welfare policies in the UK and France. It provides a policy overview, before drawing on empirical evidence about young women who find themselves NEET and EI.

Policy and welfare support overview

Over the last forty years, there has been a plethora of policy initiatives introduced across the UK in response to fluctuating, yet stubbornly persistent NEET rates. Since 2010, policy intervention has reduced, especially in England, due to austerity measures, which has impacted negatively not only on the mechanisms available to support young people in the NEET group, but on the capacity of some government agencies to accurately quantify the number within the NEET group (Maguire 2015). This section draws largely on the findings emanating from policy analyses on NEET policy that were conducted between 2017 and 2018, which comprised a review of the policy literature in each of the four UK nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Case study visits were conducted in each nation, where interviews were completed with a range of stakeholders, including policy makers and education and training providers (62 participants in total). The final stage of the fieldwork comprised convening policy seminars in each country, in order to test and validate the overall findings (Maguire and Keep 2021).

The study evidenced consistency across the UK in terms of who is defined as NEET i.e. 16–24-year-olds. However, while UK-wide NEET statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) distinguish between young people in the NEET group in terms of those who are actively seeking work/unemployed and those who are EI, there is no policy framework or intervention funded by the UK government which addresses their very different needs. The conventional policy emphasis has been on reducing the number of young people who are classified as 'unemployed' and nearest to the labour market through a variety of UK-wide programmes. Increasingly, each of the four UK nations offers a different set of policies, which is leading to a growing diversification in policymaking and practice emerging across the UK (Maguire and Keep 2021).

While, in 2013, the UK government supported the EU's political commitment to a Youth Guarantee, it did not implement the programme. However, the UK has benefited substantially from the huge investment in the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and the European Social Fund (ESF), which are the key EU financial resources to support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee for the 2014–2020 programming period. For example, the YEI attracted overall funding of €8.8 billion in 2017 (European Commission 2018). YEI is targeted at regions with rates of youth unemployment which exceed 25% and associated economic inactivity, and funds initiatives such as increasing apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements and qualification attainment. Across the UK, the research identified a large number of NEET projects, programmes and initiatives supported by YEI and ESF funding and increasing concern about the future of interventions to support the NEET group post-Brexit (Maguire and Keep 2021).

In the UK, young people who claim inactivity benefits (the majority of whom are women) tend to be welfare dependent for much longer periods than their counterparts who are registered as unemployed and are actively seeking work. Research by Cooke (2013) found that over half of young people (under 25s) claiming welfare support due to economic inactivity (as opposed to unemployment) had been in receipt of benefit for over a year.

Research by Maguire and McKay (2017) showed that young women who have NEET EI status were often simply 'written off' because of the types of welfare support they may claim and that, as a result, they received limited support or intervention. Women who are NEET and EI were typically 'lumped together', without any clear differentiation between the needs and expectations of young mothers, carers and those who have physical and/ or mental health issues (Maguire and McKay 2017, 27). However, the advent of welfare reforms in the UK over recent years, most notably the introduction and gradual roll-out of the new welfare programme in the UK from 2013, namely Universal Credit (UC), has fundamentally changed how welfare assessments are calculated. Crucially, with regard to young women who are economically inactive due to childcare responsibilities, the length of time that they are able to claim UC before being expected to (re)enter the labour market has been reduced. Single parents with their youngest child between the ages of 3 or 4 years old and who are in receipt of UC are usually required to look for part-time work that is at least 16 hours a week or face sanctioning and having their UC stopped (Gingerbread 2019). Lone parents and women have been found to be particularly affected by the introduction of UC, due to a diminished lack of financial control to submit and receive weekly payments (Cheetham et al. 2019).

In a similar vein to the UK, in France since the 1980s there has been a significant government-led effort to address the challenges faced by 16–25-year-olds in their transition to adulthood due to unacceptably high youth unemployment rates. This has included:

- Increasing educational attainment rates among young people, as well as government action instigated by the Ministry of National Education called *Mission de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire* (Mission to Combat School Dropout) to reduce the number of young people leaving school without a secondary school diploma (Danner, Guégnard, and Joseph 2018a).
- Offering individual support to young people, notably through the *Missions Locales* (Local Missions), which were created in 1982 to improve the professional and social integration of young people (Aeberhardt, Crusson, and Pommier 2011).
- Encouraging more employers to recruit young people through the offer of financial incentives, including wage subsidies and tax breaks. Consequently, more than a quarter of jobs for young people under the age of 26 are financed by subsidised contracts (this comprised 510,000 beneficiaries in 2015, including 400,000 apprenticeship contracts) (Aeberhardt, Crusson, and Pommier 2011).
- The Youth Guarantee, funded by the European Council, was piloted in October 2013, in a few regions then extended to the whole country in 2017: to support young people aged 16–25-years in precarious situations towards employment or training in line with the 'work first' strategy (Giret, Guégnard, and Joseph 2020).²

In France, these various interventions have created employment and training opportunities. However, the coexistence of a succession of policies have been likened to a 'thousand leaf cake', comprising a stockpile of policies, which have made the system both complex and fragmented. Hence, the coexistence of numerous policies, which are subject to on-going changes, makes the welfare system fragmented, as well as difficult to understand and use, especially by young people. Moreover, the overall impact of policy and welfare interventions on job creation and decreasing youth unemployment is reported to have been limited (Aeberhardt, Crusson, and Pommier 2011). For example, the French Council of Economic Analysis asserted that the introduction of a multitude of different policies over a thirty-year period (more than 80 different measures), without any coherent strategy, has achieved little in terms of eradicating the problem (Cahuc, Carcillo, and Zimmermann 2013).

In addition, young people in France face challenges accessing the social assistance system, as well as welfare support. This is due to social protection being built around employment and family history (Castel 1995), and is also characterised by a lack of protection for young people under 25 years old who often lack an employment track record (Thévenon 2015). It is only recently (September 2010) that the RSA (*Revenu de solidarité active/Active solidarity income*)³ has been granted to young people aged 18-to-25-years with at least one child, or without children provided they have worked for two years out of the last three. Additionally, young women with children are better supported, as they are able to access other forms of financial support, most notably a young child allowance bonus and family allowances or specific rights to raise their children in terms of employment rights, such as maternity leave and tax breaks.

Depending on their circumstances, single women with children outside of the labour market are also able to supplement social assistance with other forms of support. For example, teenage mothers can be covered by the 'single parent' RSA or the Youth Guarantee. Young mothers who remain under parental authority are expected to be supported by them until they reach the age of 18. For those who need material and psychological support, especially when they are homeless, the Child Protection Service (*ASE/Aide sociale à l'enfance*) can also provide assistance.

A family policy of 'double' free choice has gradually been put in place in France (since the mid-1980s): parents first have the choice between the possibility of caring for their very young child themselves or of using an extra-familial mode of care; another choice is then made between very diverse forms of care, collective (*crèches*, drop-in centres, kindergartens), family (parental *crèches*) or one-to-one, the use of each of these modes being subsidised (according to the number of children and income). Moreover, a system of allowances exists to support parents to either remain at home to undertake child care for a three-year period (parental leave) or support the funding of collective or individual child care until the child reaches six years of age. In fact in France, childcare is facilitated by the existence of free pre-schools from the age of three (age of compulsory primary school since 2020). The school day extends until 4:30 p.m. and often includes a canteen where children can have lunch, as well as after-school care until 6 p.m. By having access to an organised system of day nurseries, kindergartens and public pre-schools, and by being reimbursed for part of the childcare costs, women have the potential to return to, or enter working life more quickly than in the UK, where availability and access to childcare provision and early years education is more limited.

These differences to support two-parents and lone parent families with children are interesting to point out given the similar rate of young women who were NEET and EI and other similar cultural aspects in the two countries: the average age for at which women had their first child was 28.3 years of age in France and 28.6 years of age in the UK; the average age for first marriage was 30.8 years in France and 30.2 years in the UK (Carcillo 2016). In addition, both countries had similar rates of young women who do not complete upper secondary schooling, with the rate (13% in France and 14% in the UK in 2014).

Despite these various initiatives in the two countries, we will highlight in the next section that similar barriers are faced by young women, which leads to their susceptibility to experience economic and the social exclusion. This will be achieved by comparing quantitative data from French national and longitudinal surveys and qualitative interviews in England that will allow us to learn more about the pathways of young women in the NEET and EI group.

Methodology

Data and evidence about the lives of young people in the NEET and EI group are not widely available, given the paucity of research which has been conducted on this topic. The researchers were able to share their recently collated data sources, to develop greater insights into the lived experiences of EI young women in the NEET group. A mixed methodology is used to analyse the pathways of young people, in order to understand their risk of becoming and remaining NEET and EI: the quantitative approach to quantify the number of NEET and estimate the weight of some major explanatory factors/characteristics which seem to particularly penalise them into the labour market; and the qualitative approach, by interviews, to identify and explain the social reality, experiences, perceptions, strategies from the point of view of the actors. These two methods are complementary and combine the interpretation and understanding of the data, with the quantitative data allowing a global vision and with the qualitative data contextualising the figures. Also, while the statistical data from France provides a longitudinal picture (based on four national surveys on school-to-work transition), which reinforces the existing evidence that economic, social and educational disadvantage has a strong association with NEET status, the quantitative evidence from both France and the UK highlights how early parenthood among young women has a disproportionate impact on their propensity to become NEET and EI. Moreover, the qualitative evidence from England shines a light on young women's lives i.e. their lived experiences of NEET and EI status. It highlights that educational attainment does not insulate young mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds from NEET and EI status, and from the damaging impact on their economic and social future prosperity.

In order to explore the disconnection of young people from the labour market and education in France, we analysed data from the national surveys conducted by *Céreq*⁴ that maps school-to-work transitions. For twenty years, the *Céreq* has tracked at regular intervals, a broad sample of young people who left the education system in the same year, hence the term of '*Génération*' (school-leavers in 1992, 1998, 2004 and 2010). These surveys are based on a national representative panel of school leavers who take part in telephone surveys over a five-year period. The database comprises 69,025 individuals within the four cohorts. The *Génération* surveys gather data on a multitude of factors that might influence young people's school-to-work transition, for example, access to tenured employment and the age at which young people leave their family home. Using a logistic model, we will explain the probability of remaining NEET during five years after schooling and through descriptive statistics, explain the position of young women within the 2010 survey sample who were persistently NEET for a five year-period (from 2010 to 2015).

In order to identify the pathways and experiences of NEET and EI young women in England, evidence will primarily be drawn from qualitative data, although some quantitative indication is also presented. The two-year study (2015–17) on young women NEET and EI in England was co-funded by Young Women's Trust and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. Evidence presented in this paper draws on findings from the second year of the research, which comprised in-depth interviews with 57 young women, aged 16–25-years, across nine localities in England between March and June 2017 (Maguire and McKay 2017). In addition, the second year of the research included analyses undertaken by the University of Essex of data from *Understanding Society*, which is based on the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS). The UKHLS started in 2009

and provides a large sample size (approximately 40,000 households at Wave 1), capturing a broad range of social and economic information at individual and household level. Data from 2009–2015 (Waves 1–6) were analysed and the sample included 1,736 individuals, aged 16–25-years, who were unemployed, employed or in self-employment when they entered the sample. They were followed until they either became EI or left the sample for other reasons (Maguire and McKay 2017, 13).

Evidence

As part of the *Céreq* school leaver surveys, young people retraced their activities (employment, unemployment, training, inactivity) month-by-month over a five-year period, following the completion of compulsory schooling. The data show that during the five years after schooling, experiencing a period of being defined as NEET (for one month or more) is an unavoidable destination for many young people (on average 74% of women and 69% of men). Moreover, the share of women who are NEET EI hardly changed over the duration of the survey period (five years) and for each of the four cohorts: from 7% to 6% for women (versus 1% to 2% of men) (Table 2).⁵

Table 2. NEET status five years after schooling (in %).

	1992 Cohort		1998 Cohort		2004 Cohort		2010 Cohort	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Employment	71	84	78	87	76	79	74	75
Education	4	4	4	2	5	4	6	5
NEET	25	12	18	11	19	17	20	20
EA	18	11	13	10	14	15	14	18
EI	7	1	5	1	5	2	6	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: *Céreq* 'Génération 1992, 1998, 2004, 2010' Surveys.

Note: Among the 2010 cohort, 20% of women were NEET: 14% Economically Active (EA) and 6% were Economically Inactive (EI) five years after schooling. Inactivity is defined by the answer from the interviewee who affirms being workless and not looking for a job.

Over the twenty-year observation period, while young women had a higher probability of experiencing NEET status, their propensity to become NEET has diminished in recent years: while in the first cohort (1992 Cohort) two-thirds (64%) of the NEET population was female, it had reduced to just under a half (47%) within the 2004 and 2010 cohorts (Danner, Guégnard, and Joseph 2020). A combination of three factors can explain this shift: a later age of motherhood⁶ and marriage⁷ go hand-in-hand with extended periods of time spent in education, but also the growing importance of the place of women in an increasingly flexible labour market, which offers an increasing number of part-time, zero hours and temporary jobs (Couprie and Joutard 2017). As a result of these societal developments, 46% of women in the 2010 cohort reported that they lived as a couple (out of their parents' home), compared to 60% for the first cohort.

These data reveal that very few young people remain NEET during the five years that follow their schooling: 3% of women and 1% of men over the four cohorts. This small percentage dispels the negative and static picture of NEET status. However, an analysis of individual determinants shows that women without a diploma and with children had a much greater likelihood of sustaining NEET status. The proportion of young people without a diploma who remained NEET during their five years of observation, grew from 7% to 15% for women, and from 1% to 9% for men between the 1992 and the 2010 cohorts. The diploma in France also played a very big role in a highly segmented labour market. A person without a diploma was (11 times) more likely to be NEET and EI for five years after schooling compared to a graduate (Table 3). Women with children were (5 times) more likely to become NEET and EI during the five years after schooling, in comparison to women without children.

Table 3. Probability of remaining NEET during the five years after schooling.

Variables		Coefficient	Odds ratio
Reference	Active		
Woman without a child	Woman with child	1.644	5.2
	Man without child	-0.409	0.7
	Man with child	-0.973	0.4
	Repeating in primary school	0.134	1.1*
Tertiary diploma (Isced levels 6–8)	Without diploma (Isced levels 0–2)	2.363	10.6
	Secondary VET diploma (CAP)	1.121	3.1
	Baccalauréat (Isced level 3)	0.410	1.5
Parents profession: Other	At least, one professional parent	0.220	0.8*
Parents Origin: Other	Both parents French Origin	-0.349	0.7
1992 Cohort	1998 Cohort	0.329	1.4
	2004 Cohort	0.235	1.3*
	2010 Cohort	1.176	3.2
Constante			-5,686
R ² de Nagelkerke			17.7

Source: *Céreq 'Génération* 1992, 1998, 2004, 2010' Surveys.

Note: A person without a diploma was (11 times) more likely to remain NEET during the five years after schooling than a graduate, with equivalent characteristics. The *odds ratios* indicated are significant at the 1% threshold (*except for the variables significant at 10%).

Across all cohorts, nearly one-third of women with children were inactive or unemployed, while the number of NEETs among young fathers remained relatively low (9%). This confirms Maruani's assertion that '*Inactivity is a status that remains socially acceptable for women, but hardly conceivable for men.*' (Maruani 2004, 106).

Evidence from the UK's *Understanding Society* endorses the findings from the *Céreq* school leaver surveys and shows that parenthood has a massive impact on the propensity of young women to become EI, whereas for men who have fathered a child in the past year in comparison to men who have not, there was no statistical difference. The hazard of a young woman with a new child becoming EI was found to be 17 times higher than it was for a young woman without a new child. Moreover, when allowing for the combined effects of all factors (gender, age, having a disability, having a mental health problem, living with a child), new mothers and young women who live with a dependent child were both six times more likely to become EI, compared with young men. Additionally, while high educational attainment acted as a buffer to young people's risk of becoming EI, the likelihood remains a lot higher among young women, regardless of their qualification level (Maguire and Mckay 2017).

Profile of young women in the 'persistently NEET' group in France

The 2010 *Céreq* data comprised 267 young people who were 'NEET always' i.e. persistently NEET over the five-year study period, from an initial sample of 11,143 young people. This included 134 young women (aged 15–31-years): three quarters of them were non-graduate high school students (65 without a diploma and 39 had a secondary VET diploma). Young women in the 'NEET always' group were much more likely to experience complicated schooling, for example, repeating a year, experiencing early schooling abroad or a lack of primary education. Twenty-two young women reported having a disability, while ten young women had recently arrived in France from Africa or Asia, which may reflect language and/or cultural barriers to learning. Financial difficulties also influenced their education: 51 young women had received financial support since middle school (compared to 11% of young people within the panel as a whole). A very large majority of young women (105 out of 134) had to overcome schooling difficulties without getting regular help from close relatives or friends or

private lessons (while 64% of the panel benefited from additional support). Among the 113 young women who were able to name their parents' level of qualifications, 63 had a father and 82 had a mother who did not hold a *baccalauréat* diploma. Moreover, 40 young women in the group had at least one parent born abroad. Women of Maghreb family background were more exposed to the risks of unemployment and inactivity, combining social, origin and gender inequalities (Danner, Guégnard, and Joseph 2018b).

Another important characteristic of the group is that in 2015, half of them had children (74 women),⁸ thereby reducing their availability to enter the labour market: 29 women had one child, 37 women had two children and eight women had three children. Among this group, seven young women (with low qualifications) lived in their parents' home⁹ and thirteen women (with low qualifications) lived alone as a single mother.¹⁰ It is important to point out that four young mothers did not receive any financial assistance from welfare support or from a partner. Among the 62 young women living with a partner (54 with a child), 19 did not declare a salary for their partner (12 unemployed partners) and 45 partners had a job.¹¹

The survey results highlight the difficulties for young women who are NEET and EI, especially those without diplomas and receive little or no social assistance or financial support from their parents. Indeed, parental support may be limited, given that, after schooling, 48 young women declared that they had workless parents (compared to 11% among the whole panel). Nonetheless, family support remained important because 52 young women lived with their parents.

The search or hope for a job remained at the heart of their concerns for almost half of this group. When surveyed, 70 women had registered with the national employment agency or with a temporary employment agency. In addition, most young women had taken positive action to enter the labour market: 52 had responded to on-line and newspaper job adverts, and 59 had downloaded their CVs to specialised websites. Nevertheless, despite those attempts, around 70% of the group described a complicated post-education trajectory, which is exemplified by the evidence presented in the next section.

Interviews with young women who were NEET and EI in England

The qualitative interviews with young women in England provide an illuminating insight into their world. A key finding from the research was the extent to which many young women faced multiple barriers, although the 'official' reason for their EI/NEET status was motherhood. For example, while a young woman may be in receipt of welfare support for caring for a child, the prevalence of young women experiencing depression and anxiety, and/or caring for other family members was commonplace. That is to say, while their EI status may have been attributed to one factor, other recognised 'causes' or consequences were also present.

The majority of young women relied heavily on their family for practical, financial and emotional support, with the majority living with or near their close family network, most often in disadvantaged geographical areas and from low socio-economic backgrounds. They lived where they had grown up and gone to school, having had little opportunity to gain financial independence, which may have facilitated moving away. Beyond immediate family and/or professional networks, young women were often devoid of wider social contact, with limited friendship groups and social activities, and lacking the means to travel. Consequently, low levels of self-worth and self-esteem were evidenced in the research. To young women in the sample, particularly those with children, their ability to navigate their way back into the world of work faced immense obstacles, notably: their lack of self-confidence; the challenges of securing and funding reliable affordable childcare; and finding employment in local economies where opportunity structures were limited.

Other key features of these young women's lives were their limited finances, their continual struggle 'to make ends meet' and reliance on welfare and/or family support. In particular, some found it very challenging and disruptive to make or change benefit claims, and, consequently, faced financial turbulence and insecurity. A common cause of hardship was experienced when young

women were required to switch benefit claims, as a result of changes in personal circumstances or new types of welfare support. Financial difficulties and poverty were also acute when young women lived alone and/or were lone parents.

'My mam and dad helped me loads, and then my mam was claiming for me and the baby up until last year. Obviously, she helped me with everything, she got me everything. Then, when I started claiming, then I started getting him stuff, and stuff like that, but it is hard because obviously I've moved out now. I'm paying for all the bills and everything, so I'm skint at the minute.'

(Aged 18 and lives alone with two-year-old son)
(Maguire and Mckay 2017, 44)

Somewhat contrary to the statistical evidence, most young women in the sample had academic and/or vocational qualifications, with the majority having undertaken post-16 provision. However, despite their achievements, young women were unable to progress into higher level educational provision or good quality and sustainable training and employment opportunities. Many had moved between academic and vocational courses at the same level with a range of providers, including schools, further education (FE) colleges, and third sector and private training organisations. While this lack of progression could be attributed to the disruption caused by an unexpected pregnancy, childcare responsibilities or health issues, the lack of opportunity for many young women to access independent guidance and support, as well as secure 'small steps' or pathways towards economic and social independence, is a key finding (Maguire and Mckay 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this article was to highlight that, while the term 'NEET' has become embedded internationally as a category to define young people's detachment from formal education, employment and training systems, its applicability is fraught with difficulty. Its adoption coincided with youth transitions were becoming more complex, protracted and risky (Keep 2012; Furlong et al. 2018). Moreover, young people's access to jobs at all skill levels is increasingly via 'fragile labour markets' (Furlong and Cartmel 2004), which has led to youth labour markets to become more precarious and insecure. A broadening of the age range of young people defined within the NEET group in recent years has coincided with attempts to impose subdivision, in recognition that different groups of young people occupy NEET status for a number of reasons and for differing periods of time (Maguire 2015). Specific policy interventions to address the needs of this cross-section of sub-groups are less in evidence, with a continued focus on addressing the needs of young people who are classified as 'unemployed and actively seeking work' (Maguire 2018). Moreover, significant variations in how countries apply the term 'NEET' makes comparisons of population sizes and interventions fraught with difficulties.

Adopting a similar approach taken by most other advanced nations, both France and the UK have focused on employment remedies to 'fix' the NEET agenda, with a succession of short-term initiatives targeted at improving young people's employability and access to the labour market, and a strong focus on tackling youth unemployment. The analyses of the data presented here show that such policy direction at worst ignores, or at best leaves behind certain groups within the NEET population, namely the NEET EI group and more specifically, young women with children. That is, the term 'NEET' masks their existence and fails to recognise their needs. Thus, breaking the boundaries between unemployment and economic inactivity, within NEET status, would highlight the existence of a population which is largely isolated and forgotten and to question their disengagement, vulnerability from the labour market and education. Our findings concur with Margaret Maruani (2002, 58), who argued:

'In many cases, inactivity hides unemployment and should be studied as such: one of the forms of exclusion from the labour market, one way to erase unemployment.'

The quantitative and qualitative data show that young women with children in France and the UK have a greater likelihood of being NEET and EI and to remain in NEET status. Their lifestyles are poor and characterised by deep-seated isolation coupled with financial exclusion. The evidence from both countries highlights their vulnerability, in terms of exposure to poverty, long-term welfare dependency and poor living standards. Their aspirations for self-sufficiency are marred by their dependence on family structures (often living in deprived neighbourhoods) to support them, with external childcare being out of reach, due to its unaffordability (in the UK) and inflexibility to accommodate often precarious and unsocial working patterns. Also, the predominance of low-paid, temporary and precarious jobs in their local and segmented labour markets offer little hope and incentive to change their immediate circumstances, despite the aspirations of many young women who are NEET and EI to find sustainable employment. It is not only the presence of a child that appears to be a hindrance to secure employment, as other factors also come into play. Most notably, most young women in the samples who were identified as NEET and EI want to work but not at any cost. Whether these young women are NEET EI by choice or necessity becomes an important research issue.

While the quantitative data from France pointed to young women in the NEET EI group having low qualification levels, the qualitative data from England showed a different picture emerging, with many young women in the sample having obtained post-16 qualifications. Nonetheless, their trajectories into the labour market remained equally fraught. This calls into the question the value of qualification attainment in local labour markets where opportunity structures are poor and where support services i.e. child care provision is inadequate. While the qualitative study comprised a relatively small sample size, the evidence demonstrates that improving qualification attainment with the ambition of improving economic outcomes is not a simple remedy. This needs to be accompanied by sustainable and flexible training and employment opportunities (i.e. good quality jobs with sufficient wages and working conditions), which offer sufficient financial incentives and support services which enable young people to move beyond the 'trap' of NEET and EI status. The comparison between the two countries shows that there is a need for policy interventions beyond 'employability' initiatives: policies which tackle the barriers that young people face in accessing employment (beyond their skills and qualifications), as well as their difficulties in accessing good quality and sustainable employment in their local labour markets.

Also, the findings point to a need to move beyond theoretical debates which concentrate on young people's vulnerability within the labour market and a focus on their lack of skills and employment experiences, to a much broader discussion about youth transitions. This should concentrate on examining wider social, institutional and structural factors, most notably labour markets, as well as social welfare systems and family formation (Raffe 2014, 277–278). By doing so, it would release the NEET 'world' from being defined as synonymous with youth unemployment and help to expose the catastrophic long-term impact of persistent economic inactivity on young people's social and economic inclusion.

It should also enable open debate to take place about the impact of welfare systems on young people's lives and trajectories, which remains a neglected topic. Traditional analyses of different countries' welfare systems have focused on developing different typologies of their construct, such as Esping-Andersen's seminal work 'The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism' (Esping-Andersen 1990), which suggested that welfare regimes across diverse socio-economic states could be classified within and around three categories – 'Liberal' regimes e.g. the UK e.g. largely means-tested welfare support, which is targeted at low/no-income groups; Conservative or 'conservative-corporatist' regimes e.g. France, which is based on paid work and aimed at maintaining social and professional status; and Social-democratic regimes e.g. Sweden offering a high level of social protection as well as social services. Feminist writers have highlighted that such examples of welfare regime analysis based on a male model (*the male breadwinner model*, strong in UK, moderate in France, weak in Sweden), and have demonstrated little critical consideration of the role of women in the provision of welfare provision and, in particular, the tensions between assumed care services/responsibilities and the expectations to assume paid employment (Lewis 1997). Thus, informal child care work is recognised

differently in different countries. For example, in Sweden, parental leave is paid at 80% of the previous salary over a 13 month period, while in France it is poorly paid (€397.20 per month in 2019) over a three-year period, or severely time limited in terms of maternity/paternity payments, such as in UK, where it last for 39 weeks made up of 6 weeks of receiving 90% of average weekly pay and 33 weeks of obtaining either £151.97 a week or 90% of average weekly pay before tax, whichever is less. Moreover, the low level of attention to the problem of access to the labour market (in particular, to low-paid/level occupations and part-time as opposed to full-time work) for women is inextricably linked to the quantity of services offered (in particular in terms of childcare) and to their assumption of caring responsibilities, which continues to maintain their unequal position in the labour market.

But above all, the place of young people, especially young women and single mothers, in welfare systems remains largely ignored. Our research exposes a need to urgently address this issue, in particular in a world where youth transitions are increasingly protracted and complex and where young people's dependency on welfare provision is growing in many countries.

Notes

1. Statistics produced by the OECD (2020).
2. In 2016, the state expenditure amounted to 233 millions euros in France.
3. The monthly amount for a person is €559.74 or, for a single parent with a child, €958.37 (April 2019).
4. French Center of Research on Education, Training and Employment is a public establishment under the aegis of the two Ministries of Education and Labour.
5. It is important to note that the NEET indicator is calculated based on a group of school-leavers, not on an age category.
6. One-third of female school-leavers, for the first two cohorts, and one-quarter, for the following two cohorts, had one or more children over the five years of observation, while the number of fathers decreased from 15% to 10% over the same period.
7. The desire to live together for some time before starting a family also certainly comes into play (Buisson and Daguet 2012).
8. Compared to 24% among the female panel.
9. They received financial assistance of €479 (median monthly amount at the time of the survey).
10. They received financial assistance of €773 (median monthly amount).
11. The median monthly salary was €1,380 at the time of the survey.

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