



Single Mothers Within The European Union

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Aperio, our partner organization in the Czech Republic supports parents in difficult life situations, shows them direction and improves their position in society. Egyszülős Központ, in Hungary is both a support and community space: they provide a variety of practical help, organize regular programs and trainings, and build a supportive community for parents and their children living in single-parent families. Gengle in Italy is the first social network in Italy dedicated to Single Parents to give them, and their accompanying children, the opportunity to make a new circle of friends, and access to professionals in fields that can offer single mothers support such as lawyers, psychologists and social workers. The Isadora Duncan Foundation in Spain has the primary objective of claiming and asserting the rights women, head of families and their families are granted by Spanish law and fighting against the obvious or hidden discrimination, which is due to the injustice they suffer. LET-FLIGHT in Croatia is a non-profit association that strives to improve the quality of life of single mothers in Croatian society. They have been providing a variety of services to single parent families since 2004. These services include but are not limited to providing access counselling and legal services, holding workshops on improving parental skills and how to search for work, and hold



peer support groups. Additionally, they work to provide information and research quality of life among single parents to promote and support their advocacy and legislation analysis efforts. Finally, Pienperheyhdistys ry in Finland has the purpose of improving child welfare by offering opportunities for children and support for parents. They organize a variety of peer activities for single-parent families and train volunteers interested in supporting families and children.

These organizations and individuals provided an immense contribution to Make Mothers Matter by sharing their time and resources in an effort to advocate for single parents. It is with hope that we can use the information provided to make concrete claims and recommendations that would improve the life of single families in Europe.



Introduction

Long gone are the days when most of the families were composed of a man, a woman and their children. Nowadays, “families are diverse and always changing”¹ and in these changing times, single parenthood has increased around the world, including in the European Union (EU).

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) conducted a series of interviews with six organizations that support single parents across a number of EU countries in order to compare their perspectives on single parenting. As mentioned, these organizations are Gengle, in Italy; the Isadora Duncan Foundation, in Spain; LET-FLIGHT, in Croatia; Aperio, in the Czech Republic; Egyszülős Központ, in Hungary; and Pienperheyhdistys ry, in Finland. This report discusses the numerous challenges that single parents face. These challenges include economic difficulties or hardships, lack of housing, energy poverty, health-related concerns, and how COVID-19 amplified these challenges. These themes highlight what organizations working with single parents see as significant concerns. The aim of this report is also to highlight the actions of these organizations, bringing to the forefront the work they do, from holding finance workshops to providing technology for children from struggling families, while also acknowledging the problems the organizations continue to face. In tandem with this work with single parent organizations, Make Mothers Matter also conducted academic research to learn more about the concerns they brought up. Ultimately, with this report Make Mothers Matter seeks to raise awareness on the struggles single parents, in particular single mothers face and develop perspectives that will support single parents in Europe.

A recent [study](#) led by the European Parliament, found that from 2009 to 2019, the number of single-parent households increased from 12% to 14%.² According to [Eurostat](#), “in 2020, approximately 14% of households with children (7.8 million households) consisted of single parents, accounting 4%

¹ Nieuwenhuis, Rense, “The situation of single parents in the EU”, requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, November 2020.

² Nieuwenhuis, Rense



of total households”.³ But inside the EU, the situation regarding single-parent households differs from one country to another. For instance, in 2020, in Sweden, 34% of all households with children were single-parent households, whereas in Spain, they represented only 9%.⁴

For the [European Commission](#), “regardless of the diverse causes for single parenthood, single-parent families are among the most vulnerable household types, along with large families. In the EU, 47 per cent of single-parent households were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2017, compared with 21 percent of two-parent households”.⁵

It is worthwhile to take time to define the expression of “single mother”. The answer is somewhat confusing and may vary from country to country. From MMM’s point of view, the definition of Wim van Lancker, Joris Ghysels and Bea Cantillon, is pretty complete: single-mothers are “female adults living alone in a private household with dependent children,” where it is assumed that mothers are the only one, or at least primarily, responsible for their children.⁶

The generalization can be made, based on the organizations interviews and data collected, that most single parent household are women. It is important to remember that men are also faced with similar challenges when they are the head of single parent households. In any case, it is important to remember that the “single mother’s group” may involve many different situations and is not an unchanging status.

The phenomenon of single-mothers is on the rise; their situation is quite problematic and not usually taken into account when issuing policy measures. Indeed single-mothers are “among the most vulnerable social groups in society”.⁷ More specifically, “single mothers are more likely to fall into poverty, to be unemployed, to have taken a part-time job in order to combine professional and family

³ “How many single-parent households are there in the EU?”, Eurostat, European Commission, 1 June 2021.

⁴ “How many single-parent households are there in the EU?”

⁵ Jordan, Victoria, et al., “Mechanisms supporting single parents across the European Union”, produced for the European Platform for Investing in Children, published by the European Commission’s department of Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion, June 2019.

⁶ Van Lancker, Wim, et al., “An international comparison of the impact of child benefits on poverty outcomes for single mothers”, Centre for Social Policy, n°12/03, March 2012.

⁷ Van Lancker, Wim, et al



life, to have poorer physical and mental health – the rate of depression is particularly high among single mothers – and to have difficulties in building lasting new relationships”⁸, even in the European Union.

This paper will analyze some of the determinants of these single-mothers’ difficulties in their daily life, highlight some good practices and inform the EU and the public in general of the challenges these associations have to face to make a change for single-mothers and to truly take their situation into account.

1. Economic difficulties, single-mothers’ welfare, lack of financial security

It is time to draw attention to single-mothers’ situation and to the difficulties they are facing, especially on the economic side. It is impossible to talk about single-mothers without mentioning the economic difficulties they face and the fact that their economic resources are one of the main determinants of single-mothers’ poverty risk and well-being in general.

Those who support single mothers recognize the paramount importance of financial stability and autonomy when it comes to determining the success of the household. “Gengle” found it is necessary to identify single-mothers’ problems and try to give them the best solutions possible⁹ as “single-parent families, the majority of whom are headed by women, face greater risk of poverty, material deprivation and other forms of impaired well-being”.¹⁰ From these economic difficulties arise many more troubles and pitfalls for single-mothers. For the “[Isadora Duncan Foundation](#),” the personal and economic autonomy of women who are head of their households is fundamental for an efficient and responsible house management.¹¹ Moreover, improving the economic situation of single-

⁸ Heine, Sophie, “The rise of Single Motherhood in the EU: Analysis and Propositions”, *European Policy Brief*, n°42, March 2016.

⁹ Pasotto, Giuditta. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 22 October 2021.

¹⁰ Nieuwenhuis, Rense, “The situation of single parents in the EU”, requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, November 2020.

¹¹ García Álvarez, María. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 19 October 2021.



mothers is key to increase their welfare, social integration, and, more broadly, to reduce their vulnerability.

It is important to recognize that in both single fathers' and single-mothers' cases, that "the absence of a partner in the household limits the number of potential earners and potential caregivers in the household. This alone makes it more difficult to earn a wage that exceeds the poverty line, makes the household more vulnerable to fluctuations and temporary interruptions in employment, and to combine work and family responsibilities".¹² However, we know that these resources are vitally important to meet their basic needs and for the well-being of their children as well.

Single-parent households are already facing an increased risk of poverty because of the absence of a potential second earner, but the gendered disadvantage women can experience, in the labour market particularly, exacerbate this lack of disposable income for single-mothers and increase the difficulties they have to face. Single-mothers are then hurt twice. When looking closely at single-parent households, we can conclude that a large majority of these families are headed by women. Indeed, in the EU-27, "it becomes very clear that single parenthood is strongly gendered: many more households with a single adult and dependent children are headed by women (11% in 2019) compared to men (3%), although this family form has also become more common among men".¹³ This is true as well for the organizations Make Mothers Matter interviewed for this report. From north to south and east to west, these associations report that mothers are indeed over-represented in the single parent households. For instance, the Italian association "[Gengle](#)" and its representative Giuditta Pasotto held that 70% of the community they receive is made by women.¹⁴ Or in a survey performed in May 2021 by LET-FLIGHT in Croatia, of 166 parents who participated in the study, 15 were fathers (9%) and 151 mothers (91%).¹⁵

¹² Nieuwenhuis, Rense, "Thematic Paper: Peer review on single mothers facing poverty: providing adequate financial, material and social support for sustainable social integration", European Commission, Event of 5-6 October 2017.

¹³ Nieuwenhuis, Rense

¹⁴ Pasotto, Giuditta. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 22 October 2021.

¹⁵ "Quality of life of single-parent families in the republic of Croatia, research results", LET-FLIGHT, May 2021



Women in particular face a variety of challenges in employment. Women face discrimination when trying to obtain a job. Indeed, their employment rate is lower than the one of men: in 2021, in the European Union, the employment rate for men was 78.5% whereas.¹⁶ There are some great differences between countries within the EU. In 2019, in Greece the employment rate for women was only about 50% compared to 70% for men, whereas.¹⁷ As a consequence, single-mothers' associations in Europe are providing services in order to help them seek jobs. This is part of the support the Isadora Duncan Foundation provides to single parents as they apply and search for jobs in Spain They help mothers create a resume of their capacities, qualities, and abilities that they have obtained through their work experience, train them on different techniques for job search and provide them with professional information and orientation regarding the job opportunities available in the mother's area.¹⁸

Further, women are more likely to be paid less than men for equal work. In 2020, in the European Union, the average gross hourly earnings of women were 13% lower than men for an equal job. Here also there are some consequential differences between European Union member states: in Latvia, the difference between average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees was 22.3%, compared to 0.7% in Luxembourg.¹⁹

Women spend much more time in unpaid work, including routine housework. On average, women in OECD countries spend almost double the amount of time per week than men in unpaid work. Women therefore bear the brunt of domestic and family responsibilities, both of which are unpaid and largely unrecognized forms of labour".²⁰ Moreover, because of unpaid care work responsibilities women are more likely to be over represented in precarious work (such as part time work)²¹ meaning "employment that satisfies at least one of the following criteria: very low pay, very

¹⁶ "Employment Annual statistics", Eurostat, 10 June 2021.

¹⁷ Bisello, Martina, et al., "Women and labour market equality: has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?", Eurofound, 2020.

¹⁸ García Álvarez, María. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 19 October 2021.

¹⁹ "Gender pay gap statistic", Eurostat, November 2021.

²⁰ Buckingham, Sophie, et al., "Precarious work from a gender and intersectionality perspective, and ways to combat it", requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, November 2020.

²¹ Chabas, Charlotte, "La réforme des rythmes scolaires, un 'impact significatif' sur l'emploi des femmes", Le Monde, 1 September 2017.



low intensity working hours, or low job security”.²² Here again there are some variances between all European member states. In general, as a report for the European Commission found, “women are still seen as primary caregivers, whether that be for children, dependent family members or the elderly. Statistics from EIGE show that 15% of women aged 15-64 who are inactive in the labour market are inactive for caregiving reasons (looking after children and/or incapacitated adults), compared to only 1.4% of men.

For the Croatian organization “[LET-FLIGHT](#)”, single-mothers can also suffer from even greater financial difficulties when they are divorced. They reported that in Croatia, as well as in other European countries, in case of divorce, alimonies are not always received by newly single mothers.²³ Without these alimonies, single-mothers lose a source of income that can be crucial to their well-being and that of their children.

To tackle these economic difficulties, the mechanisms in place in European countries are a combination of policies to support people in precarious situations in general and targeted policies to support single-parents economically. Within targeted policy, “there are typically two types of policies aimed at countering poverty risks faced by single-parent families: 1) policies providing various forms of social assistance, and 2) policies facilitating access to the labour market”.²⁴

For Make Mothers Matter the following policy recommendations could alleviate the situation of single parent families.

A key element to improve single-mothers’ situation lies in the improvement of their economic independence. Indeed, “the living conditions of women living alone are better where women have:

- easy access to employment and targeted initiatives that support job search and engagement

²² Buckingham, Sophie, et al.

²³ Jovicic, Iva. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 26 October 2021.

²⁴ Jordan, Victoria, et al., “Mechanisms supporting single parents across the European Union”, produced for the European Platform for Investing in Children, published by the European Commission’s department of Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion, June 2019.



- where social security entitlements are not only related to the length and continuity of the employment history
- where public services are available to support the care role of lone women
- where social benefits and public transfers are individually based, rather than ‘family’ based.²⁵ When social assistance is individually based rather than family based, the living conditions of single parent households increase because the pressure of taking care of family members in addition to completing household chores is reduced
- better and easier access to resources and more structured and effective social security systems would improve the economic difficulty of single mothers and allow them to support both themselves and their families more effectively
- specific social assistance policies designed to improve the living conditions of single mothers
- assistance policies, such as minimum income and pension schemes, that take into account the specific vulnerabilities of single mothers

The aim of policies providing social assistance is to reduce poverty risk and social exclusion for single-parents. In some countries such as Austria and Ireland, single-parents can benefit from tax credit. In some regions in Spain, single parenthood is recognised as a legal status to attest that the parent is the only bread-earner in the family. As a result, single-parents in Catalonia, can benefit from subsidised property tax, a transport discount, and support when purchasing social housing.²⁶ Nevertheless, these policies are sometimes ineffective. Fundación de Familias Monoparentales “Isadora Duncan” in Spain, explained that, although tax measures and aid sound good on paper, they do not always adequately assist single parents. Fine prints and strict requirements hinder the policy’s ability to assist those in need.²⁷

Some countries are working on facilitating access to the labour market for single-mothers. Indeed, “organisations and governments may also put in place measures to encourage flexible working

²⁵ Policy Department C Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, “Women living alone: evaluation of their specific difficulties”, European Parliament, Women’s rights and gender equality, 2012

²⁶ Jordan, Victoria, et al.

²⁷ “Situation of single-parent families in Spain”, Isadora Duncan. 2021



arrangements such as part-time working or flexible working hours, to enable parents to fit their working schedules around family and care commitments”.²⁸ For example Slovakia provides an extended period of maternity leave specially for single-mothers.²⁹ In Greece, the period of parental leave is double for single parents. The Czech Republic offers longer periods of long-term care leave for children under the age of 10 to single-parent families. Finally some countries offer the possibility to transfer leave to another relative, as in Bulgaria, where this can be transferred to the father in case of illness or death of the mother – and, after the child has reached six months, maternity leave is transferrable to the mother’s or father’s parents if the father is unknown or deceased.

However, a peer review conducted during a 2017 event hosting 11 EU countries found that “employment can be associated with beneficial outcomes, but was shown not to be sufficient condition for socio-economic well-being for all single parents and only in the context of social policies that support employment”.³⁰ Make Mothers Matter is convinced that the employment, earnings, and pension gaps between men and women cannot be solved without substantive action on care work, mostly undertaken by mothers. This unpaid family care work has to be taken into account because it “is both an important aspect of economic activity and an indispensable factor contributing to the well-being of individuals, their families and societies”.³¹ Mothers can help develop their children’s skills, contribute to personal development, and facilitate social inclusion. This work has to be recognized and valued. Many of the economic and financial problems mothers face are due to the non-recognition of, and lack of support for, unpaid family care work.

One solution that can be provided is to recognise, reduce and redistribute the unpaid family care work that mothers usually perform in order to provide single-mothers the flexibility to choose how to balance family care and their career. The European Union should, for example, introduce “care credits” to offset breaks from employment taken to provide informal care to family members and to

²⁸ Jordan, Victoria, et al.

²⁹ Dančíková, Zuzana, “Slovak Republic”, Leave Network, April 2020.

³⁰ Nieuwenhuis, Rense

³¹ Ferrant, Gaëlle, et al., “Unpaid care work: the missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes”, OECD Development Centre, December 2014.



count those towards pension rights and to recognize and validate the skills acquired by mothers while doing unpaid family care work.³²

The European Parliament has made important steps towards the recognition of the need to change our economic discourse. For example, European Parliament member Lina Gálvez Muñoz, in her “Report on Women’s Poverty in Europe” of June 2022 specifically addressed the issue of gender-based poverty.³³ This report cites MMM’s report on Women’s Poverty Europe,³⁴ addresses economic inequality as it “notes that all Member States have increased care packages during the pandemic and introduced special provisions for single-parent households [and] urges the Member States to extend such provisions during the recovery period”.³⁵ In this way, the report both acknowledges work that has been done so far and highlights the work that still needs to be accomplished.

2. Housing difficulties and energy poverty

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union under [article 34\(3\)](#) provides “the right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources.”³⁶

As both cause and effect of their poverty and economic difficulties, single-mothers are more likely to face other difficulties such as severe housing deprivation and energy poverty. Broadly, for the European Union, “the incidence of severe housing deprivation is highest among single parents with dependent children (6.5%), and couples with three or more children (8.4%).”³⁷

³² “Policy paper on the European Care Strategy,” *Make Mothers Matter*, March 2022

³³ Gálvez Muñoz, Lina. “Report on Women’s Poverty in Europe.” *European Parliament*, 24 June 2022.

³⁴ “Mothers’ Poverty in the EU”, *Make Mothers Matter*, June 2021.

³⁵ Gálvez Muñoz, Lina

³⁶ “Article 34 - Social security and social assistance”, *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, September 2021.

³⁷ “Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU”, produced for the European Platform for Investing in Children, published by the European Commission’s department of Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion, March 2020.



Severe housing deprivation can be defined “as living in a dwelling that is overcrowded, while also exhibiting at least one of the following four housing deprivation measures: a leaking roof, no bath/shower, no indoor toilet, or a dwelling considered too dark”.³⁸ Because of their employment, resources and socio-economic context, single-mothers are more likely to be affected by poor housing conditions. Although the situation of single parents within the EU regarding housing deprivation improved between 2010 and 2018, single-mothers are still disadvantaged compared to other families.³⁹ For instance, in Cyprus, “lone parents share the highest burden related to housing costs than any other household type with dependent children”.⁴⁰ Access to decent housing is a problem for single-mothers in all member states.

These poor housing conditions have a negative impact on both the mother and the children’s well-being. In addition, “people living in unaffordable, poor-quality or insecure housing are more likely to report poor health and to suffer from a variety of health problems”.⁴¹ This is supported by the European Parliament policy department regarding Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, which sees that “housing is one of the fields where a growing number of families have been facing increasing difficulties in recent years, with negative consequences for the health, wellbeing and development of the most vulnerable people like lone women”.⁴²

Moreover, poor housing conditions are often linked with other serious problems such as energy poverty. Energy poverty is recognised when a person encounters in his/her accommodation difficulties to have sufficient energy supply to satisfy his/her elementary needs. This can be due to the inadequacy of resources or housing conditions.⁴³ Women are at greater risk of energy poverty than

³⁸ Eurostat “Glossary: Severe Housing Deprivation Rate”, 13 Apr. 2021,.

³⁹ Nieuwenhuis, Rense

⁴⁰ Pavlou, Susana. “Mutual Learning Programme: Peer Country Comments Paper – Cyprus”, created for the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity, European Commission, Event of 10-11 May 2010.

⁴¹ Clancy, Joy and Feenstra, Marielle, “Women, gender equality and the energy transition in the EU”, Eurostat, May 2019.

⁴² “Women living alone: evaluation of their specific difficulties”, requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, September 2008.

⁴³ Clancy, Joy, et al.



men, because more women than men live in uninsulated homes, use inefficient appliances (particularly for heating, cooking, hot water) which further translate in expensive energy bills.⁴⁴

The Isadora Duncan Foundation approaches this problem by organising workshops to educate single families and help them become financially empowered as well as training them on how to achieve a responsible and sustainable consumption of energy. They facilitate workshops to fight specifically against energy poverty, which explain energy bills, how to apply to energy financial support, and ways to avoid debt and energy waste.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, there is a serious lack of studies and data within the European countries that leads to a lack of awareness on energy poverty. In December 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on access to energy and called for the EU to include a gender lens in all its energy policies to allow for a better understanding of women with particular needs. For the director of the Brussels office of the City of Vienna, Michaela Kauer much remains to be done..., “currently, the European Union is undertaking significant efforts to improve the energy efficiency of the built environment, with a huge renovation wave strategy brought forward. However, the Commission still fails to clarify whether this approach will be gender-sensitive in vision and process, not the least in delivery. The first issue at stake is to increase the visibility of gender inequalities in energy poverty and participatory actions”.⁴⁶

The newly adopted 2021 EU Child Guarantee which aims “to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access of children in need to a set of key services, thereby also contributing to upholding the rights of the child by combating child poverty and fostering equal opportunities” is a step in the right direction. The Guarantee targets children in precarious family situations, and expressly includes children living in a single-earner household. It also acknowledges that housing expenditure is a heavy burden for single-earner households, especially those headed by women. These

⁴⁴ Clancy, Joy, et al.

⁴⁵ Álvarez, María García. Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 19 October 2021.

⁴⁶ Kauer, Michaela, “The female face of energy poverty is still invisible”, Michaela Kauer is the director of the Brussels office of the City of Vienna, linking Vienna with EU policy and global sustainability goals.

Euractiv, 13 April 2021.



are important mechanisms for "tackling social exclusion of children and minimising the risk of homelessness"⁴⁷ and that could support single parent families.

Good practices addressing housing difficulties and energy poverty can be highlighted in the member states. For example, in Spain, "a new strategy to provide children with adequate housing gives priority to large families and single-parent families".⁴⁸ Along the same line, in France, single-mothers can benefit from several housing subsidies such as the "aide personnalisée au logement" and the "allocation de logement familiale", as well as other benefits and loans for home improvement, including energy. Further, "Brussels has designed targeted measures to promote affordable housing for single mothers, and it plans to strengthen its "Housing First project". The "Housing First Project" is an innovative method that is aimed at bringing the most vulnerable homeless population, which includes single mothers, social inclusion and access to housing. Madrid is providing temporary housing and support for women with children aged four and under. These policies are "often accompanied by psychosocial and educational assistance and aim to make single-parent families economically autonomous".⁴⁹

Such practices that provide support for single-mothers in housing and energy poverty should be further encouraged by the EU and spread to all member states. Moreover, "stronger synergies are needed between anti-poverty strategies and other economic and social policies such as gender equality, employment, taxation, family and housing policies".⁵⁰ The report of European Parliament of June 2022 on Women's Poverty stresses the urgent need to act in this field by calling "the EU and the Member States to protect women living in energy poverty by providing a timely and coordinated response to address the long-term impact of the energy crisis;" specifically, it "highlights that access to affordable utilities must be guaranteed to low-income households, and in particular older women

⁴⁷ "Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee," *Official Journal of the European Union, European Council, 4 June 2021*.

⁴⁸ Jordan, Victoria, et al.

⁴⁹ "Fighting child poverty in European", *Eurocities, December 2020*.

⁵⁰ "Poverty, gender and lone parents in the EU", *European Institute for Gender Equality, 19 September 2016*.



and single mothers”. It also calls for policy addressing single parents’ increased risk of “homelessness, lack of access to adequate housing and energy poverty” overall.⁵¹

3. Health issues

All of the issues presented in this report are interrelated. Thus, factors such as economic fragility and housing difficulties make single mothers more likely to face health problems and to have difficulties meeting their children’s needs.

This situation can lead to both physical and mental problems because of all the pressure mothers carry. For Wim Van Lancker, Joris Ghysels, and Bea Cantillon, there is a connection between “single motherhood and bad health, stress, joblessness, problems in coping with the work-family conflict, poverty and social exclusion”.⁵² As highlighted by the Council of Europe, the health of members of single-parent families may be poor as a result of various conditions prevailing in this type of family set-up: the financial situation of single parents is very often precarious, the accumulation of social roles by single parents creates a physical and psychological overload that can also have repercussions on the children, and the social and emotional life of members of single-parent families is thrown off balance by the pain of separation, divorce or bereavement”.⁵³

The mental health of mothers is often overlooked compared to other health concerns. As mentioned above the “accumulation of social roles by single parents creates psychological overload”. There are higher risks of depressive or anxious symptoms for mothers of young children that have to stay home and be a mother at all times. [Aperio](#), in the Czech Republic, helped mothers already before the pandemic, cope with psychological distress. Their program “Single, but Strong” supports mothers through group meetings and e-learning. They provide counselling for mothers who

⁵¹ Gálvez Muñoz, Lina

⁵² Van Lancker, Wim, et al.

⁵³ “Report on Psycho-Social Aspects of Single-Parent Families”, Council of Europe.



could not afford it otherwise.⁵⁴ This kind of group support can be very effective in allowing mothers to have an outlet among people that they can relate to. The EU research funded project, Riseup PPD (Peripartum Depression), of which MMM is a partner, found that 1 in 5 women develop a mental illness in the perinatal period.⁵⁵ Mental illness in the perinatal period adversely affects mothers' overall health, the infant's health and development and disrupts the mother-infant dyad and family relationships. It is clear that without appropriate awareness mothers will continue to face barriers when accessing health care and continue to face challenges alone.

In these difficult times, some associations that support single mothers insist on the importance of the support and listening that single-mothers can also give to each other. The interviewed Finnish association “ Pienperheydistys ry ”, realised that in Finland, women were looking for peer-support more than financial help when they were coming to their association. In these types of associations, single-mothers can find peers in the same situation who understand and who they can relate to, without fear of judgement. Indeed, they observed that in Finland, the financial situation of single parents is not as bad as in other countries and that they mostly need emotional support, especially with the significant impact COVID-19 had on mental health for single parents. For Pienperheydistys ry , the emotional issues parents face are more important today in Finland than the stigma of being single parents. In Helsinki, being a single parent is currently a relatively normal and socially accepted status. There is, however, a need for more social awareness on the emotional issues experienced by single parents, and importantly, by the children.⁵⁶ The importance of working on this issue is also shared by the Italian organisation “Gengle,” which tries to create a network between single-mothers and to reassure women in their situation and that singlehood is socially normal and accepted.⁵⁷

Moreover, the majority of interviewed organisations supporting single parents reported the fact that economic difficulties can lead to difficulties in having good health insurance in certain

⁵⁴ Kodyšová, Eliška, “Single but Strong: Empowerment of Single Parents in the Czech Republic”, *Aperio, Presentation, 2020.*

⁵⁵ Rise up PPD, *Research Innovation and Sustainable Pan-European Network in Peripartum Depression, see <https://www.riseupppd18138.com>*

⁵⁶ Koola, Riikka and Syrjänen, Kaisli. *Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 22 October 2021.*

⁵⁷ Pasotto, Giuditta.



countries or to having proper nutrition and a healthy diet. Mothers are known to experience what is referred to in a study on nutritional health and wellbeing amongst food insecure women in Europe as the “maternal sacrifice”. In this situation mothers tend to skip a meal or eat less nutritious meals in order to provide the best options for their children. Indeed, they also found mothers are less able to purchase good quality foods such as vegetables, which are more expensive, may not have the time to cook by themselves (favouring pre-prepared meals), and tend to privilege their children’s nutrition over their own.⁵⁸

To encourage social support for single mothers Pienperheydistys ry in Finland offers the “Buddies for kid’s program” in which adult men volunteer to spend their time with children who have little opportunity to form connections with men. This gives children the opportunity to form safe and trustworthy relationships with a wide variety of people and to expand a network of support and development for children of single mothers. The organization Pienperheydistys ry offers a program in which volunteers can act as grandparents. This program called Grandma’s (Mummila) – where three generations come together - , provides activities for children, families and grandparents striving to increase the children’s support system. Having a variety of people to support single mothers and their children alleviates stress on the parent and child and reduces their risk of poverty.

Finally, when single-mothers suffer from poor health, children of single-parent families can also become collateral damage in these difficulties. Children of single-parent families are among the most vulnerable social groups in society. In a 2020 contribution to the European Commission, Make Mothers Matter pointed out that “as women tend to be mainly responsible for the purchase of basic goods and are key for the sustenance of the household, their precarity directly impacts their family”.⁵⁹

“Poverty is both a cause and a result of poor health, and reducing health inequalities will contribute to combating poverty”.⁶⁰ Moreover, in the new European Child Guarantee Council

⁵⁸ Bell, Z., Scott, S., Visram, S., Rankin, J., Bamba, C., & Heslehurst, N. (2022). *Experiences and perceptions of nutritional health and wellbeing amongst food insecure women in Europe: A qualitative meta-ethnography*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 311, 115313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115313>

⁵⁹ “Make Mothers Matter’s Contribution to the European Commission Consultation ‘Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe’”, Make Mothers Matter, 27 November 2020.

⁶⁰ Van Lancker, Wim, et al.



Recommendation, Member States are called to “ensure consistency of social, education, health, nutrition and housing policies at national, regional and local level and, wherever possible, improve their relevance for supporting children in an integrated manner” and “continue and where necessary step up investment in education, adequate health and social protection systems in order to address effectively the needs of children and their families, in particular of those exposed to social exclusion”.⁶¹ In order to effectively address the needs of children however, maternal health care must be included in the Child Guarantee Action Plan. Without the presence of a healthy mother, children will continue to face challenges when it comes to their social and physical health, education, nutrition and housing.

In this area, some good practices should be highlighted, especially in maternal health care. For instance, in Luxembourg, “women who are pregnant or have just given birth benefit from a certain number of advantages in the workplace. These advantages aim to protect women’s health and to allow them to devote themselves fully to their child after the birth. Pregnant women are exempted from work to allow them to attend their antenatal check-ups and benefit from a special organisation of their working hours if they are breastfeeding.”⁶² In Romania, even if health coverage is not “universal” and if great socio-economic inequalities persist, there is some progress with the introduction of a plan granting pregnant women and postpartum mothers special rights within the social health insurance system.⁶³ Women who qualify for the plan (usually because they have no income) are insured without having to pay the insurance premium or co-payments. They are also entitled to free ambulatory treatment and transport to the hospital for delivery and emergencies.

Maternity leave is intended to safeguard the health of the mother and her child during the perinatal period. This is critical to health, considering the physiological demands associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Studies by the ILO show that “longer maternity leaves are associated with fewer premature births, less depression among mothers and with lower perinatal, infant and child mortality. Longer maternity leaves are also associated with longer durations of breastfeeding, which

⁶¹ “Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, European Council, 4 June 2021.

⁶² Bauler, Laurent, “Luxembourg- Peer review on single mothers facing poverty: providing adequate financial, material and social support for sustainable social integration”, European Commission, Event of 5-6 October 2017.

⁶³ Vlădescu, C., et al.



in turn improve child health and development outcomes.”⁶⁴ In a survey⁶⁵ of 23.000 mothers conducted by MMM France, most mothers highlighted their desire to see maternity leave extended to help them recover from the fatigue and change of pace that follow childbirth, to be able to breastfeed for longer and to be better prepared when they return to work. For these reasons, MMM calls for an extension of the duration of the maternity leave in the European Union and for the revision of the maternity leave Directive extending the period of leave to at least 18 paid weeks with a remuneration at least of sick pay level.⁶⁶

4. COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges that single-mothers have to face. The pandemic also increased the inequalities between men and women that already existed. Women have been more likely to suffer during this pandemic of an increase of intimate partner violence, overrepresentation in services sectors that have been particularly severely affected, etc. “The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have not only widened the gaps between women and men but have also led to the exacerbation of economic and social differences within different groups of women”.⁶⁷ Single-mothers have been hit by the pandemic in many ways. For instance, many single-mothers have needed to go to work when schools were closed but did not have the necessary income to hire a baby-sitter or couldn't access any type of family support. Moreover, many mothers that were teleworking during the pandemic, and especially during the lockdowns, had to manage both their paid job and their children's needs with school, homework, and care all by themselves. As a consequence, single-mothers had to deal with rising unpaid care work while keeping with their paid work. As highlighted

⁶⁴ “Maternity Protection Resource Package: Module 3 Maternity Protection at work : why is it important?”, International Labour Organization, 2012.

⁶⁵ Make Mothers Matter, ‘Donnons la parole aux mères’ (Let's Give Mothers a Voice) in November 2020/21, <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-france-presents-results-of-1000-days-survey-will-french-mothers-be-heard/>

⁶⁶ Make Mothers Matter, “Policy paper on the European Care Strategy,” March 2022

⁶⁷ Profeta, Paola, et al.



by the report requested by the European Parliament of 2021⁶⁸, “even if women have generally provided a greater quantity of childcare than their male counterparts during the COVID-19 pandemic, there existed a redistribution of household and childcare tasks in heterosexual couples. However, single mothers have not counted with such support, while also having to manage the disproportionate economic stress faced by single-income households during the crisis. In fact, single mothers were the ones to spend the longest in childcare tasks, with an EU average of 77 hours per week”. These findings were also revealed in 2020 by the European Commission published report which emphasized that “coping with the increased burden at home and making ends meet at the same time can be particularly difficult for already vulnerable groups such as single mothers”.⁶⁹

In an effort to relieve some of the stress single parent families felt during the pandemic, the organisation [Egyszülős Központ](#) in Hungary tried to address the additional stress by providing laptops for children schooling from home, as well as sending food to single families. They also offered professional online mentoring for children to help them complete their homework so that the parent has the time to work.⁷⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the amount of work that mothers bear the brunt of, as childcare and house maintenance duties have increased while their paid workload has remained the same. “A case study on the mental health among the German population, found that the initial high levels of anxiety declined in the overall population during the first month of the Covid-19 situation, but for single parents these levels did not dissipate”.⁷¹

Furthermore, different studies demonstrate the higher risk for psychological stress that single mothers present compared with mothers in a relationship. The recent article “Cumulative Stress of Single Mothers” focuses on the risk factors for this stress of single mothers and defends the argument that the level of stress depends on the combination of a number of different stressors and that this cumulative effect should be taken into consideration when developing prevention measures and

⁶⁸ Profeta, Paola, et al.

⁶⁹ Blaskó, Zsuzsa, et al.

⁷⁰ Nagy, Anna Interview. Conducted by MMM EU Delegation, 18 November 2021.

⁷¹ Nieuwenhuis, Rense



interventions.⁷²

⁷² Sartor Teresa, et al.



Conclusion

Single parenthood is becoming more and more common in the European Union and women head a majority of single parent households. Compared to other types of families, single parents are more likely to be at risk of poverty, to suffer from material deprivation, and to experience health issues. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased both the economic and social difficulties of single-mothers and their families, emphasizing the need to bring about visibility to the issues faced by single mothers.

Even though the European Union has limited influence on national policies to address the issues that affect single-mothers it plays an important role in gender equality, particularly toward employment and social protection policies. The EU has the power to guide and influence how countries shape their policies and can suggest a line of action to set higher standards and encourage countries to raise their ambitions. This will help preventing the existence of large gaps between policies implemented by different governments within the European Union.

Unfortunately, the actions led by the European countries, though improving and becoming more efficient, are still limited and are not taking into account the situation of single-mothers from a more holistic point of view. For instance, efforts are mostly directed towards economic aspects (i.e. access to the labour market). Efforts regarding single-mothers' economic situation must, of course, be continued and developed in order to increase single-mothers' economic independence and to avoid a high risk of poverty and social exclusion.⁷³ But as explained before, all the difficulties that single-mothers face are interrelated and therefore focusing solely on financial support to single-mothers' is not a complete and sustainable solution.

It is very important to MMM that the European Union monitors and fosters work-life balance policies to directly target single-mothers full participation in society: "positive measures should combine different policies, including the investment in public services and infrastructure that would

⁷³ "The European pillar of social rights action plan: steady progress for unpaid care work", Make Mothers Matter policy brief, 14 April 2021.



secure the provision of accessible and affordable high-quality care, health services and transportation and the entitlement to paid care leave with effective job guarantees”.⁷⁴

European countries should provide anti-poverty policies that can guarantee “sufficient economic protection, not just for traditional forms of paid work over the life course, but in particular, for those carrying out unpaid caring work or non-standard employment, or those affected by career interruptions caused by care responsibilities.”⁷⁵

Furthermore, to help single-mothers, the EU has to face the huge challenge of breaking down gender stereotypes, that are “another factor triggering female precarious work, with career choices being partially socially constructed and gender segregation a deeply entrenched feature of educational systems and occupations across the EU”.⁷⁶ It seems, then, critically important to promote gender equality in both care and work. Implementing policies such as care credits, a government assistance program which offsets breaks from employment taken to provide informal care to family members and count towards pension rights and to recognize and validate the skills acquired while performing unpaid family work.

To conclude, when undertaking legislative changes, it is important to acknowledge single-mother’s difficulties and to raise awareness on many unrecognised challenges. For instance, some authors deplore the fact that energy policies in the EU member states seem to be “gender blind and implementation appears not to adopt gender approaches which is exacerbated by the lack of gender-disaggregated data”.⁷⁷ MMM therefore encourages the EU to continue to gather information about the different challenges faced by single-mothers. This awareness will help both single-parent organisations and the European Union create effective and long-term solutions.

Finally, raising awareness and informing on the issues affecting single motherhood also helps single-mothers themselves to be aware of the types of support that exist.

⁷⁴ “Poverty, gender and lone parents in the EU”, *European Institute for Gender Equality*, 19 September 2016.

⁷⁵ “Poverty, gender and lone parents in the EU”, *European Institute for Gender Equality*, 19 September 2016.

⁷⁶ *Buckingham, Sophie, et al.*

⁷⁷ *Clancy, Joy and Feenstra, Marielle, “Women, gender equality and the energy transition in the EU”, Eurostat, May 2019.*





Index of Organizations

The following organizations took part in the Single Mothers report

Aperio

Czech Republic

Information provided by Eliška Kodyšová

Find Aperio at <https://www.aperio.cz/en>

Egyszülős Központ

Hungary

Information provided by Anna Nagy

Find Egyszülős Központ at <https://www.egyszulo.hu/>

Gengle

Italy

Information provided by Giuditta Pasotto

Find Gengle at <https://gengle.it/>

Isadora Duncan Foundation

Spain

Information provided by María García Álvarez



Find the Isadora Duncan Foundation at <https://isadoraduncan.es/>

LET-FLIGHT

Croatia

Information provided by Iva Jovovic

Find LET-FLIGHT at <https://udrugaleset.hr/>

Pienperheydistys ry

Finland

Information provided by Riikka Koola and Kaisli Syrjänen

Find Pienperheydistys ry at <https://www.pienperhe.fi/single-parent-association/>

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