

Single Mothers Within The European Union

Introduction

The number of single parent households has increased over the past decade¹, representing the diversity and complexity of modern-day families. However, single parent households are “among the most vulnerable household types,”² and women are, disproportionately, the parent at the head of these households³. As a result, single mothers face a wide variety of challenges related to their unique responsibilities.

To address this often ignored issue, Make Mothers Matter conducted interviews with single parent support organizations across multiple countries. These organizations were **Gengle**, in **Italy**; the **Isadora Duncan Foundation**, in **Spain**; **LET-FLIGHT**, in **Croatia**; **Aperio**, in the **Czech Republic**; **Egyszülős Központ**, in **Hungary**; and **Pienperheydistys ry**, in **Finland**. The representatives from each organization described the state of single parent needs in their country, as well as the diligent action the organization has taken to address these needs, such as providing laptops to families in need⁴ and creating peer groups for single parents to find support with others⁵.

By contrasting the reports of the single parent organizations and conducting further research, Make Mothers Matter has seen that single mothers face unique challenges in finance, housing, and health. We encourage the European Union to support the choices of women as they continuously shape their work-life balance, combat gender stereotypes that place disproportionate responsibility for single parenting on women, and highlight the work of organizations that support single mothers.

Economic difficulties, single-mothers' welfare, lack of financial security

Beyond the financial burden of caring for a family on one individual's income, single mothers also face disproportionate financial burdens due to discriminatory hiring practices⁶, pay gaps between

¹ Rense NIEUWENHUIS, “The situation of single parents in the EU”, European Parliament, November 2020.

² “How many single-parent households are there in the EU?”, Eurostat, European Commission, 1st of June 2021, <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/fr/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210601-2>>

³ Rense NIEUWENHUIS, “The situation of single parents in the EU”, European Parliament, November 2020.

⁴ Nagy, Anna. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 18 November 2021.

⁵ Pienperhe. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 22 October 2021.

⁶ Eurostat, Employment Annual statistics, 10 June 2021 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_annual_statistics>

men and women⁷, and reduced opportunity based on caregiving responsibilities⁸. In order to address this imbalance, Isadora Duncan in Spain provides support for single mothers looking for work by helping them improve their applications and by providing information on job opportunities⁹. Further, Croatian organisation “LET-FLIGHT” recognizes that alimonies can be a critical source of income for single mothers and their children, but these alimonies are sometimes not paid¹⁰.

To address the economic difficulties that single mothers face, European countries use both general and targeted policies. Targeted policies may involve either providing resources to single parent families or facilitating a single parent’s access to employment. These policies, then, can range from tax benefits to flexible working hours.¹¹ However, economic challenges do not account for all challenges that single parents face.

Housing difficulties and energy poverty

Single-mothers are more likely to face housing deprivation and poor housing conditions due to employment challenges and social context¹². Housing deprivation can cause further problems, including health issues and energy poverty. Energy poverty, characterized by a lack of access to energy needs such as heating and cooking, is also connected to financial challenges.¹³ Isadora Duncan has created workshops to help mothers manage their energy use and access to energy.¹⁴

There is a lack of information on gender-specific policy related to housing and energy, but there is encouraging progress, such as the 2021 EU Child Guarantee, which acknowledges the unique housing needs of children in precarious situations such as having a single parent¹⁵. Some EU member states, including Spain, France, and Belgium, have instituted policies that explicitly help single parent families

⁷ Eurostat, Gender pay gap statistic, February 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics>

⁸ Sophie BUCKINGHAM, Camille FIADZO, Virginia DALLA POZZA, Laura TODARO, Claire DUPONT, Kari HADJIVASSILIOU, “*Precarious work from a gender and intersectionality perspective, and ways to combat it*”, European Commission, November 2020.

⁹ “Situation of single-parent families in Spain”, Isadora Duncan.

¹⁰ Jovovic, Iva. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 26 October 2021.

¹¹ Employment, social affairs and inclusion, “*Mechanisms supporting single parents across the European Union*”, European Commission, June 2019

¹² European Commission, “Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU”, March 2020

¹³ Joy CLANCY, Marielle FEENSTRA, “Women, gender equality and the energy transition in the EU”, European Parliament, May 2019

¹⁴ Álvarez, María García. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 18 November 2021.

¹⁵ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION establishing a European Child Guarantee, 4 June 2021

obtain housing. In the European Parliament, Lina Gálvez Muñoz wrote a resolution on women's poverty concerns that addresses the housing and energy needs of single mothers.¹⁶

Health issues

Single parents can face a number of physical and mental health issues based on access to resources and degree of social stress.¹⁷ However, mental health is often overlooked, and single mothers, on average, face a higher degree of anxiety¹⁸. It is important to note that the physical and mental toll single parenthood takes on the mother affects her ability to care for her family, thereby impacting their health.¹⁹

In the Czech Republic, the organization Aperio helps single mothers with mental health concerns through programs such as "Single, but Strong," which provides access to group support and therapy that gives single mothers an outlet.²⁰ In Hungary, the organization Egyszülős Központ tried to relieve pressure during the Covid-19 pandemic by giving children access to laptops, food, and mentoring, allowing the parent to focus on work.²¹ Gengle, in Italy, works to create a network for single mothers to connect with one another²². Finally, though single parenthood is generally accepted in Finland, Pienperhe finds that single mothers still seek friendship and social interaction, organizing gatherings for these families.²³

The importance of single mothers' health emphasizes the need for maternal health care. One key facet of this care is maternity leave, which can lower rates of premature births, mental health concerns, and mortality for both mother and child.²⁴ For these reasons and more, Make Mothers Matter maintains that maternity leave must be longer and at least partially financially compensated in the EU.

¹⁶ Gálvez Muñoz, Lina. "Report on Women's Poverty in Europe." European Parliament, 24 June 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0194_EN.html#title5>

¹⁷ Wim Van Lancker, Joris Ghysels and Bea Cantillon, "An international comparison of the impact of child benefits on poverty outcomes for single mothers", CSB working paper, n°12/03, March 2012

¹⁸ European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs "The situation of single parents in the EU." <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses>>

¹⁹ Make Mothers Matter, "Make Mothers Matter's Contribution to the European Commission Consultation "Have your say on reinforcing Social Europe", 27 November 2020

²⁰ Eliška Kodyšová, "Single but Strong: Empowerment of Single Parents in the Czech Republic", Aperio. presentation

²¹ Nagy, Anna. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 18 November 2021.

²² Pasotto, Giuditta. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 22 October 2021.

²³ Koola, Riikka and Syrjänen, Kaisli. Interview. Conducted by Johanna Schima, 22 October 2021.

²⁴ ILO., "Maternity Protection Resource Package: Module 3 Maternity Protection at work : why is it important?", 2012.

Conclusion

Compared to other types of families, single parents are more likely to be at risk of poverty, to suffer from housing and energy deprivation, and to experience health issues, each of which are interconnected. Because policy related to single mothers is based primarily on individual countries, rather than the European Union, there are still clear gaps across Europe. Further, most policy is not comprehensive, often focusing on economic solutions, and may not take gender into account.

At MMM, we believe it is critical to develop policies that allow single mothers flexibility in how they choose to balance work and family obligations. This may include care leave or anti-poverty protection. MMM also seeks to address the system of gender stereotypes that create many of these challenges for single mothers, such as hiring practices that lead many single mothers to precarious employment. Ultimately, the EU must gather information about single mothers, as there is currently low awareness surrounding their needs. Increasing this awareness could make a real difference in policy decisions that would help single mothers in the long term.