

## The situation of single parents in the EU <sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, describes trends in the situation of single parents in the EU (with additional evidence from Iceland and Norway). It analyses the resources, employment, and social policy context of single parents and provides recommendations to improve their situation, with attention to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

### Background

Single parenthood is becoming more common in the EU. The majority of single parents in the EU do well, in the sense that they have employment, do not live at-risk-of-poverty and are not materially deprived. As the majority of single-parent households are headed by women, this is in part an achievement in gender equality. Yet, compared to couples with children, single parents do have higher rates of living in a household with low work intensity, at-risk-of-poverty (AROP), or material deprivation. During the period 2010 to 2018, the situation of single parents in the EU improved: their rates of severe housing deprivation, severe material deprivation, at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE), and very low working intensity decreased. However, at-risk-of-poverty rates did not improve.

### Aim

Against this background, the aims of this study are:

- Describe trends in the situation of single parents in the EU, based on official statistics;
- Analyse the resources, employment, and social policy context of single parents in the EU. The study also describes policies on single parents in Iceland and Norway to further illustrate effective examples to follow;
- Provide recommendations to improve the situation of single parents in the EU, with attention to the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

<sup>1</sup> Full study in English: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL\\_STU\(2020\)659870\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU(2020)659870_EN.pdf)



## Findings

Single parents have become better-resourced. Even though lower educated parents are more likely to become a single parent than higher educated parents, over time the share of single parents with a low level of education decreased and the share with a high level of education increased. In addition, particularly in North-Western European countries, both parents continue to be involved in the care for their children after separation or divorce, and an increasing number of children live equal amounts of time with both parents. This practice of joint physical custody is associated with good outcomes for the well-being of both children and parents.

Single parents have become more likely to be employed, and less likely to live in a household with a very low work intensity. However, compared to two-parent families, this employment is more likely part-time and based on temporary contracts. For an increasing number of single parents, work is not a guarantee against poverty. In-work poverty is lower in countries with employment protection, active labour market policies, paid leave, childcare, and adequate levels of redistribution.

Child support policies regulate the financial responsibilities of parents towards their children after separation. In many European countries, however, they are not highly effective in reducing poverty among single parents and their children, among other reasons because of their high level of complexity in relation to family diversity, and an interplay with means-tested benefits. Guaranteed advances on child support payments improve the effectiveness in reducing poverty among single parents, and help avoid long delays in support payments. Separating parents can retain (joint) legal custody in most cases (given that they had it prior to separation), which also suggests that the large variation across Europe in how common it is for children of separated parents to live with both parents relates to other factors. These include national norms on parenting and details of how custody law is implemented such as parenting plans and the legal presumption of joint custody.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most important policy in promoting gender equality in the labour market and facilitating the employment of single parents, and to prevent the adverse outcomes among children of growing up in poverty. However, socially stratified use of ECEC means that this policy fails to reach in full those children and families who might benefit from it most. Enrolment in ECEC is more equal in countries that publicly provide or subsidize ECEC, guarantee a place for each child, provide higher quality, and have lower out-of-pocket fees for parents. In the majority of European countries, single-parents pay a larger share of their household income for childcare than two-parent households. Paid parental leave has the potential to increase employment among single parents and reduce their at-risk-of-poverty, and parental leave for fathers has the potential to create more gender-equal caring relations that last even when parents separate. For fathers to take up parental leave, the leave has to be non-transferable, well-paid and flexible. Yet, in the EU more than 1 in 10 working women and 1 in 8 working men are not eligible for statutory paid leave, in part due to precarious work.

Child benefits are perhaps the most effective form of redistribution to reduce poverty among single parents and working families alike. Child benefits administered through tax benefits can result in higher-income families receiving higher benefits than lower income families, thus underachieving their potential in poverty reduction. In the majority of European countries, the levels of child benefits declined relative to average wages. Periods of unemployment can be particularly challenging for single parents without a second earner to fall back on. Unemployment benefits have fallen in a small majority of European countries, and are below 75% in a large majority. Levels of minimum income protection for single parents have fallen, and are far below at-risk-of-poverty levels in all European countries but Cyprus.

The social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for single parents are still largely unknown. Based on early research findings, and lessons from previous economic crises, three risk factors for single parents were identified: school closures may be particularly difficult for single parents and their children, single parents work in sectors of the economy more strongly affected and income loss may be more difficult to compensate without a second earner, and if a period of austerity will follow this may disproportionately hurt single parents. Already, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, levels of social protection for single parents were weaker than they were prior to the Great Recession.

The European Union has limited influence on policies specifically for single parents, but has become increasingly influential in the areas of gender equality and in particular employment and social protection. The commitment to support employment and to reduce poverty is stated in the Europe 2020 strategy, was further implemented in the Social investment package, and is currently manifest in the pillar of social rights with the Directive on Work-Life Balance as an early deliverable.

An assessment of the EU policy context of single parents raised a number of prominent critiques. European integration was to be linked to increased levels of economic inequality within Member States, in important part due to spending limits and fiscal discipline in the European Semester leading to welfare state retrenchment. Gender equality was argued to have mostly been promoted to purposes of economic growth, and not considered in full. It has long been argued that employment growth in the EU alone has not been sufficient to reduce poverty. This study demonstrated that despite fewer single parents being low educated, fewer single parents living in a household with a very low work intensity, more single parents working, and greater involvement of both separated parents in the care for their child(ren), at-risk-of-poverty rates have not declined for single parents in the EU. Markets have become too precarious and unequal, and social security and in particular levels of minimum income protection were found to be inadequate and falling.

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