

BUILDING EFFECTIVE POLICIES TO SUPPORT SINGLE PARENTHOOD

**European expert meeting
Key reflections and findings**

November 2022

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has damaged our societies and economies, and the war in Ukraine is adding further pressure (expanding the number of single parent families in Europe). The situation has also put centre stage the role of families as safety nets while magnifying the shortcomings of our systems which have been ignored for too long. This situation is unacceptable and now is the time to build back better using national and EU policy and legislative tools to achieve greater wellbeing of children and their families, access to high quality, inclusive and community-based services.

Co-hosted by COFACE and Women 4 Women Czech Republic, this European expert meeting explored the effectiveness of family policies to address the realities of single parent families.

Single parenthood, like any family type, is not a homogenous block and covers different realities: headed by mothers, fathers, and even by a grandparent raising their grandchildren, having one child or being a large family, being from a migrant background, having a child or parent with disabilities. According to a recently commissioned European Parliament study, single parenthood is becoming more common in the EU, and the majority of single parent households are headed by women. For some people, single parenthood is a choice. But for many it is not, and linked to a series of life events they have not chosen. Children in single parent families do not necessarily have any more needs than children in other types of families, but their vulnerabilities will increase due to heightened risk of poverty and exclusion of their parent. 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. The share of single parents among all households with children varies considerably from one country to another in the European Union, from more than 20% in Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and France to less than 9% in countries like Croatia, Romania, Finland, Greece, Slovakia, Malta, Poland, Spain, Slovenia. More [here](#).

Each policy should aim for universal results by triggering a two-track way of thinking from the beginning (i.e. mixing universal measures for all families and targeted measures for families in vulnerable situations). This cannot be treated in parallel or one after the other, this universal particularism needs to be integrated in the thinking from the outset. This will allow for policies that aim to prevent and redress the situation, mobilising all levels of governance in an integrated way. In order to do that, the policy-making should be more inclusive and allow concerned families and their representative organizations to participate to their shaping, monitoring and evaluation.

The European expert meeting objectives were the following:

- Explore the reality of single parents across different EU countries, using a multi-generation lens;
- Discuss existing challenges and solutions in policy and practice;
- Review family policies to integrate and respond to diverse needs of families of today, in light of developments under the EU Child Guarantee action plans;
- Boost the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, namely principles 2 (gender equality), 3 (equal opportunities), 9 (work-life balance) and access to childcare and support to children (11)

The keynote presentations are available at www.coface-eu.org

Programme

9.00-9.30 Welcome and round of introductions

Ivana Tykač, Co-founder and Director of Women 4 Women, Czechia

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE Families Europe

9.30-11.00 Setting the scene

Supporting single parents and their children under the EU Child Guarantee: objectives, plans, partnerships.

Martina Štěpánková Štýbrová - Director of Department of Family Policy and Protection of Children's Rights, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Czechia.

Beyond family policy: The effectiveness of policies to address the realities of single parents in the European Union

Rense Nieuwenhuis, Associate Professor in Sociology, Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI), Stockholm University

11.00-11.30 Stretching and coffee break

11.30-12.15 Study session 1: Mental health and work-life balance

Anna Nagy, Director of Single Parents Foundation, Hungary

Mary O'Halloran, Board Member, Irish Countrywomen's Association, Ireland

12.15-13.00 Study session 2: Policies which reach out to single parent realities

Rasa Zemaite, Coordinator, National Assembly of Active Mothers, Lithuania

Daniel Alvarez, Project Manager, Isadora Duncan Single-Parent Foundation, Spain

13.00-14.00 Lunch break

14.00-14.45 Study session 3: Separation, mediation and blended families

Evelyn Martin, Honorary Chairperson, ÖPA, Austria

Christophe Cocu, Director, Ligue des Familles, Belgium

14.45-15.30 Study session 4: Housing solutions for social and economic integration

Kamila Šaffková, Family counsellor and mediator, Women 4 Women, Czechia

Nina Ould Ami, President of the Fédération Syndical des Familles Monoparentales, France

15.30-15.45 Stretching break

15.45-16.30 Conclusions and next steps: comprehensive solutions for intersecting vulnerabilities of single parents

Camille Roux, Policy and Advocacy officer, COFACE Families Europe

Welcome

Ivana Tykač (Co-founder and Director of Women 4 Women, Czechia) and Annemie Driescens (President of COFACE Families Europe) welcomed the participants of the expert meeting which included 50+ experts from Czechia and Europe.

Ivana Tykač opened with a focus on Czech culture and citizens. Supporting single parents and creating policies to support them and their children, the key topic of the expert meeting, is essential for the organisation Women4Women. In order to achieve this, it is important to understand the society and culture, its strengths and limitations, and how it can be mobilised to build a common future, supporting the persons in need. Concerning Czech culture, Ivana highlighted different cultural traits to explain the way families think and act: cautious, emotional, sensitive, skillful. This cultural introduction aimed to provide European participants with a better understanding of the current Czech societal situation as a base for finding common issues and areas for future European cooperation with the COFACE network.

Annemie Driescens reflected on the wider European and neighbourhood context: the ongoing economic and social crisis, the war in Ukraine are devastating our societies and putting at the centre stage the role of families as safety nets while magnifying the shortcomings of our systems. Families of today are diverse and always changing but, in each culture, families provide the natural structure in which people and especially children receive emotional, financial and material support that is of great importance for their development. She took the COFACE Child Compass 2030 as a starting point for reflections on single parenthood, ensuring that all children have equal opportunities and be treated equally regardless of their family setting. Additionally, the EU political context is favourable to discussions on single parenthood from a two-generation perspective (child and adults) with the recent adoption of the European Child Guarantee (in June 2021) and the launch of the European Care Strategy (September 2021).

Annemie referred to recent data indicating that single parenthood is becoming more common in the EU, and although single father families have become more common the majority of single parent households are headed by women. For some, single parenthood is a choice. But for many it is not a chosen path but rather linked with a relationship break up or other life events. In addition, life-course analyses reveal that over time the composition of lone parent households can change. They are increasingly transitional, many single parents re-partner or re-marry, leading to an increase of so-called **blended families**. Even if for many single parenthood is a transitory state in their life course and although the majority of single parents and their families fare well and show resilience, they are more likely to live at risk of poverty or exclusion, or experience material deprivation.

It is clear that life in single parent families is more complex and determined by different external factors that go beyond their family structure. External factors that can make them vulnerable are strongly related to their job and financial situation, the challenges in education, their living and housing conditions, the problems they have to find a balance between work and their family, the lack of public services and social benefits they can rely on. Even if the share of single parents varies considerable from one country to another in the European Union and the diversity among single parents makes it more complex for policy makers, **it is urgent to ensure policies address the realities of single parent families.**

The expert meeting, with the help of speakers from 9 countries, aimed to take stock of existing challenges and solutions, and to join forces to review and build effective policies to guarantee to all single parent families:

- A warm and affordable home
- A suitable job and well-paid family leaves
- Access to childcare and support services

Setting the scene

This opening session had **keynote speeches** to set the context for the discussions, describing trends in the situation of single parents in the Czechia and in Europe. The keynotes also reflected on the heightened poverty risk of single parents, as well as the need for strong policies which are developed with family diversity at the core and matching their specific support needs in terms of early childhood education and care, and long-term care.

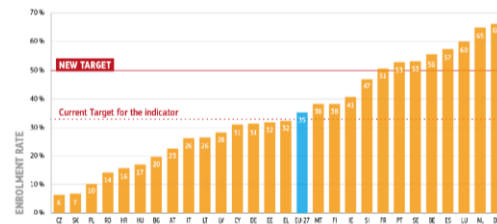
Supporting single parents and their children under the EU Child Guarantee: objectives, plans, partnerships.

By Martina Štěpánková Štýbrová - Director of Department of Family Policy and Protection of Children's Rights, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Czechia.

Martina Štěpánková Štýbrová started with an overview of the situation of single parent families in Czechia. There is strong labour market performance for both women and men, but there is low labour market participation of women with children under 6 years, with a high gender employment gap, low uptake of flexible work arrangements (which are not always on offer) and lack of care service infrastructure. The rate of divorce after 5 years of marriage is around 40-50%, and 32,4% of single parent families are at risk of poverty – compared to 42,4% at EU level, while Czechia is performing well overall compared to other EU countries concerning overall risk of poverty rates (9-10% of the population). However, a high proportion of the population is just above the income poverty line. Therefore, the social situation needs to be constantly monitored and responded to flexibly as new challenges and problems emerge. These include, for example, the effects of the recent coronavirus pandemic or the current high energy prices.

The most important source of income for single parent families is paid jobs, followed by social security income and alimony. 70% of single parents received alimony but not giving it is one of the most common crimes in Czechia. Under Czech policy, the State intervenes if the second parent does not pay.

Following a European overview of ECEC enrolment rate for children below 3 years old based on 2019 EU-SILC data (comparing the current EU target 33%, and the new proposed 50% target), this indicated that Czechia is the country with the lowest enrolment rate in the EU. Hence a number of measures are being taken to improve the ECEC infrastructure using the Recovery and Resilience Facility and other EU funds to support this transition.



Czechia focuses on increasing flexibility in terms of childcare and employment, as well as reducing the negative impact of parenthood on employment (especially for women). Concrete measures are defined in the Family Policy Strategy (approved by the government in September 2017).

- Increasing capacities of quality and affordable preschool childcare services (over 1100 of children's groups with more than 15000 places and 98 micro-nurseries with 680 places for youngest children).
- The amendment to the Children's Groups Act is in the legislative process with the aim to ensure quality affordable modern service for the youngest children from 6 months to 3 years through stable State funding and transformation of children's groups into nurseries (because this concept is internationally well known) in order to create comprehensive and follow-up systems of preschool services (nursery up to 3 years, entitlement to a place in kindergarten from 3 years).
- More flexibility of parental allowance: In January 2018, the possible period of drawing a parental allowance has been shortened to make it more flexible (minimum duration is approximately 6 months, with the allowance of up 70% of the previous income; possibility of faster drawing up to 7600 CZK (ca 313 euros) for persons who are not eligible for maternity benefit – students, self-employed or unemployed). Since 2020 the total amount of parental allowance increased from 220 000

CZK (ca. 9042 euros) up to 300 000 CZK (ca. 12331 euros) and the possibility of faster drawing for parents without sickness insurance (students, self-employed, unemployed) has increased up to 10 000 CZK (ca. 411 euros) a month and the limit for children up to the age of 2 attending childcare services when drawing parental allowance has risen from 46 hours to 92 hours a month.

- From February 2018 fathers are entitled to “fathers post-natal-care benefit” as 70% of the previous income. Fathers can stay 7 days during the first 6 weeks after the childbirth at home and take care of the mother and child.
- Support of flexible working arrangements – a legislative framework of job sharing was approved as an amendment to the Labour Code and came into force in January 2021. Job sharing implies that one job position can be shared by two or more employees with shorter working hours and one job description.
- Planned financial support for employers – support for selected target groups (people with disabilities, people over 60 years, people caring for a child under 10 years or a person in some degree of disability, people under 30 years) through the project of the Labor Office “FLEXI” (allocation of CZK 697 million – ca. 29 million euros). The amendment was approved by the government in July 2020 and came into force in July 2021.



The **Czech National action plan for Implementing the Child Guarantee 2022-2030** was under preparation at the time of the expert meeting. The overarching goal is to prevent and combat the social exclusion of children in need by ensuring their equal access to key services for pre-school education and care, education (including school activities), health care, nutrition and housing. The guarantee for children should help to achieve the newly set goal in the Action Plan for the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** to reduce the number of people living in poverty by 15 million, including at least 5 million children, by 2030. The National goal for Czechia is

to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 120 000, reducing the number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 50 000 by 2030. To achieve this, many target groups (19 in total) have been identified including children living in single parent families. Measures for single parent families include the following:

- Develop ECEC : Preschool services and after school services (including leisure activities and free lunches at school), with also financial support through the Recovery and Resilience Facility and support to municipalities through the Technical Support Instrument. They are also considering how to support free lunches beyond school (e.g. also during the holidays)
- Social work/services, including social work at school
- Support availability of social/affordable apartments
- Increase the number of preventive school programmes (including a focus on mental health)
- Capacities of health services, especially in the field of child psychiatric, addiction and palliative care.
- Capacities of preventive, community and professional services of the care system for vulnerable children and families

The coordination between main actors (school, family, municipality, NGOs) will be strongly encouraged with the aim to ensure equal access to education, to reduce the number of segregated schools and to fight with early school leavings. They will finally support involvement of parents/carers in the labour market, especially through flexible forms of work and childcare services (see EU Work-life balance directive minimum standards).

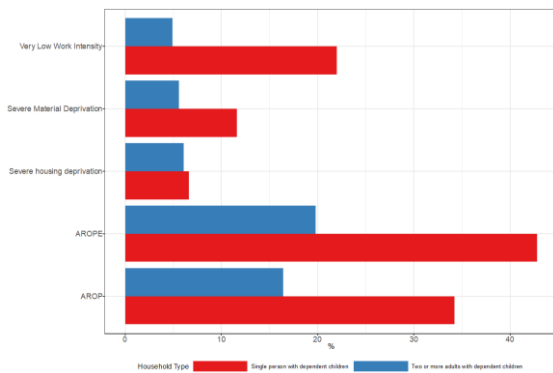
Participants of the expert meeting referred to similar situations in other EU countries, and there were exchanges specifically on the alimony system and the court systems to enforce payments. The additional external pressures of migration from Ukraine are putting extra pressure on the existing social system, as well as the inflationary economic context and rising energy prices. This makes it urgent to invest in boosting social protection/family policies to ensure that families, including single parents, can be resilient to these shocks. Cooperation with NGOs was considered essential for implementation of Child Guarantee measures, as well as effective coordination and reinforcement of existing services for families.

Beyond family policy: The effectiveness of policies to address the realities of single parents in the European Union

By Rense Nieuwenhuis, Associate Professor in Sociology, Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI), Stockholm University.

Taking the European Parliament study he authored as a starting point, Rense Nieuwenhuis gave a first overview of the state of play of single parents in regard to poverty and social exclusion compared to families with two or more parents. In general, single persons with dependent children are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than two or more adults with dependent children.

Figure 4: Various at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion indicators by family type, EU-27 average, 2018



He referred to the triple bind of single-parent families, which can be explained as the interplay between disproportionate inadequacies in resources, employment and policies.

- Inadequate resources due to the absence of a second caregiver, earner (gendered: often the father) or lower levels of education. Poverty has not reduced despite increased education, involvement of separated fathers and employment.
- Inadequate employment due to precarious employment conditions or gendered disadvantage on the labour market. Single parents increased their employment but employment is no guarantee against poverty.
- Inadequate policies, due to welfare state retrenchment (turn towards activation) and gendered (family) policy models.

Shared residence for children living equal time between parents is associated with better outcomes for child wellbeing/parental employment, health and wellbeing. This is much more common in some countries than in others, and it is not clear why.

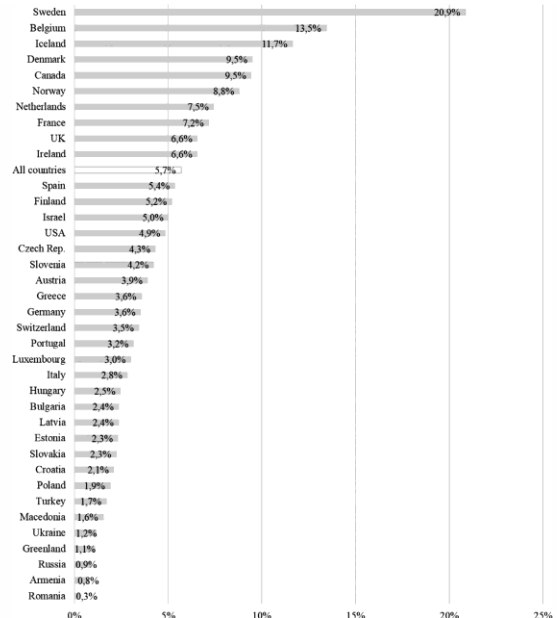


FIGURE 1. Prevalence of Symmetric Joint Physical Custody (JPC) Arrangements on Noncontact Families in 37 European and North American Countries (N = 92,886).
Note. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (2002, 2006, 2010; HBSC).

Source: Steinbach, Anja, Lara Augustijn, and Gerrit Corkadi. "Joint Physical Custody and Adolescents' Life Satisfaction in 37 North American and European Countries." *Family Process*, April 15, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12536>.

Single parents experience poverty and deprivation to a far larger extent than two-parent families, despite progress in education, employment, shared care with fathers. Nieuwenhuis reflected on the reasons for their poverty risks not declining by examining three policy areas: **policies for single-parent families, policies for all families with children, and finally social policies for all (families).**

Concerning **child support for single-parent families**, this only achieves a marginal reduction in poverty since the majority of single parents do not receive child support; the financial amounts are small; the rules cannot keep up with family diversity (e.g. re-partnering); and the interplay with other policies can lead to negative results (e.g. child support subtracted from means-tested social assistance).

Concerning **policies for all families with children**, (child benefits, paid parental leave, ECEC), these are well-documented to support the employment and economic well-being of single parent families. There can be challenges with targeting families in

vulnerable situations such as stigma, low take-up and reduced voters' support, so that a generalist approach is useful, especially if taking a life-course perspective (e.g. aiming to retain mothers' employment before becoming a single mother) and gender responsiveness (e.g. with reserved leave for fathers, to improve gender equality and fathers' involvement in children's life). However, the more generalised support trends can still increase stigma. Despite subsidies, data shows that single parent families actually face more burden on accessing ECEC - out-of-pocket expenses for ECEC are still a large burden on household income of single parents, reaching up to 20/30% of their household income. Hence when creating subsidies, it is important not to create more burden.

As concerns **policies for all families** (of working age), data shows that reform of unemployment benefits resulted in a surge in poverty amongst single parents (and singles without children) in Sweden. For dual income families, unemployment benefit retrenchment had less impact but for single parents, unemployment resulted in poverty-level incomes. The system did not take into account single earner realities. As for minimum income protection levels across the EU, these are mostly not adequate to support the financial realities of single parents with two children, with worsening adequacy between 2010 and 2018: again a case of broader welfare not taking into account the realities of single parents.

In conclusion, some directions of thought.

- Resources: Reconsider gender, family diversity, and the role of fathers, since this is currently invisible in current EU social indicators.
- Employment: Earnings often inadequate for single parents. Gendered inequality often originated prior to separation.
- Policy: Effective social welfare policies are needed beyond those that are specific to single parents, or even beyond families with children. Single parents are often affected most by inadequate social protection. Be careful to put education and jobs at the centre of every solution.
- Single parents versus single people: It is important to consider not only single parents, but broader social policy approaches to single people more broadly, looking at both individual and family resilience.
- Perceptions of single parenthood need to change: this type of family is not necessarily vulnerable. It can be a choice and also represent gender empowerment.

Four study sessions on single parenthood

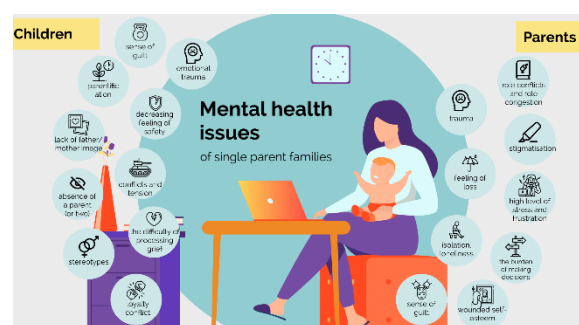
These four study sessions focused on different yet overlapping realities for single parents:

- Study session 1: mental health and work-life balance
- Study session 2: effectiveness of family and broader policies to take into account single parent realities
- Study session 3: separation, mediation and blended families
- Study session 4: housing solutions for single parents.

Study session 1: Mental health and work-life balance

Anna Nagy, Director of Single Parents Foundation, Hungary

In the EU, there are 9 million single parent families and 320 million children in the world live with only one parent. The deprivation and risk of poverty are much higher in these families. In light of the ongoing crisis of war on the borders of the European Union, the energy crisis and increasing poverty Anna Nagy asked: why should we worry about mental health? Because if these families are not strong enough mentally, they will find it even more challenging to tackle these shocks. **This presentation focused on the mental health of single parent families from two perspectives: the perspective of the child and the perspective of the adults.**



Where single parenthood is not a choice, and the family separates, **the feeling of safety can disappear from a child's life** (in cases where the situation was stable and safe before the separation). Conflicts and tensions can provide difficult family environments for children to grow up in, and children should not grow up in a battlefield. But

even in cases of divorce and reduced conflicts or reduced violence as a result of separation, children do not usually have the tools to process such change (such as grief/loss of one parent), and it is up to the parents or grandparents to help them through the transition. The absence of a parent is very visible and tangible and when a parent leaves, the remaining parent has to invest double time and “replace” the other one. Hence, in many cases, children find themselves alone, with no parents to help them through separation and divorce, which can make it a challenging time for their mental well-being. In addition to this, there can be additional indirect or direct stigmatisation of children who come from single parent families.

From the perspectives of adults, a challenging separation or divorce can take its toll on the parents as well with different impacts. Parents will in some cases seek to “replace” their partner with their child/children, but a child should be a child and they should not deal with the parents’ issues. Especially the first year of any transition to single parenthood can be tough, and the Single Parents’ Centre in Budapest has identified some difficulties people can face when becoming a single parent. The first is isolation and loneliness. Single parents lose many things when they become a single parent: a partner, families, and friends. A sense of guilt can follow, as well as wounded self-esteem, the burden of making decisions alone, high levels of stress and frustration. Single parents try to achieve work-life balance but it is challenging, and especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The Single Parents Centre in Budapest focuses on 6 main areas:



Single parents have been invisible for a long time, but there are two Single Parent centres in Budapest. They offer more than 70 different services which shows the complexity of the issues of single parent families. The Centre organises leisure activities for children such as summer camps, day care to facilitate some time-out for single parents and improve their work-life balance.

Mary O'Halloran, Board Member, Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), Ireland

Mary O'Halloran focused on two challenging areas facing single parents in Ireland today.

1. The first is the Irish State's lack of recognition of the unmarried family
2. The second is the lack of affordable childcare in Ireland.

The Irish Countrywomen's Association, believe that these are the two fundamental challenges which are preventing Irish single parents from achieving a sustainable and fair work-life balance.

In Ireland **there is a lack of recognition of unmarried families.** The Irish Constitution only recognises the married family - it does not provide a definition of family but stipulates the necessity of marriage, and until the 1980s the stigmatising from society led single mothers to give their children to adoption. The most recent Census statistics informs us that in Ireland one in three children are born to parents not yet married to each other; one in three families do not conform to the traditional model of a married couple in their first marriage; and one in five children live in single parent families. The ICA joins other civil society organisations in Ireland in calling for change to Article 41.3 of the Irish Constitution on the definition of the family and replace it with a more inclusive definition, and a wider recognition of family rights. The lack of recognition of unmarried families is a discrimination which must end, and ICA is working with different organisations on this: Treoir which is the National Federation of services for Unmarried Parents; One Family which is a charity and provides information and support for people parenting alone; and Kinship Care also an Irish charity which provides information and support to kinship carers like Grandparents.

The second challenge and possibly greatest impediment to Irish single parents achieving a fair and sustainable work-life balance, is **the unrealistic cost of childcare.** Irish parents are paying the highest formal childcare in the EU. The costs are unrealistic for families with more children. According to an Economic and Social Research Institute report published in 2019 Irish parents are paying among the highest childcare costs in the OECD region. The reality is that few Irish parents can pay for full-time hours in a formal childcare setting. The Irish Childcare sector is privately managed. There is little or no state childcare available in Ireland. Childcare is probably no more expensive to deliver in Ireland than elsewhere in Europe - the difference is that it is subsidised at a

much higher level in all other countries. It is not unusual for an Irish family with three children in part-time childcare to pay 1,600 euros a month. These kinds of costs are completely unrealistic for most two-parent families, let alone single parent families. So where do they turn?

An estimated 15,000 Irish children are cared for by childminders, however the actual number of unregistered childminders is unknown. A report carried out by the Department of Children in 2020 acknowledged that “*Childminding in Ireland is almost entirely unregulated and, in some ways, invisible*”. So, who is actually minding Irish Children? **The ICA is very aware of the number of Grandparents filling this childcare gap.** ICA members want to help their adult children in providing informal and often unpaid care. However, while this may limit the financial impact and support young families, it does come with a, often unnamed, human cost.

Grandparents are filling the Childcare Gap

Informal unpaid Childcare

Older generations supporting their Adult Children in place of the state



ICA members are struggling, in more ways than one. Emotionally the burden of informal childcare is affecting the relationships of some of members with their adult children and children-in-law, while the joy of meeting up with Grandchildren becomes less joyful when care is given on a daily basis. This is not a reflection of grandparents' love, but a reflection of a flawed system that does not support young families, socio-economic disadvantages and depends on older generations to support the welfare of the younger generations. **Grandparents in some situations are providing full time care for their grandchildren with no support from the State.** In most cases, the only source of income would be the state pension and children's allowance. They are not recognised as fostering: should this be the case, financial and other supports would be available to them. Another area of crises for Irish grandparents providing unpaid care is in the area of housing. One ICA member is a Kinship carer for her teenage grandchildren and yet her home is totally unsuitable for their needs. One of the areas that is of most worry is the inability to police their grandchildren's lives online. One ICA member

expressed her total lack of knowledge of how to use her grandchildren's electronic devices and found that they were accessing totally inappropriate content while in her care. In Ireland today, with the cost of living crisis, the cost of mortgages and childcare, many grandparents, some willing and some, not so willing, facilitate childcare on a daily basis, free of charge to the State. Such a responsibility imposes restrictions on grandparents who otherwise might avail of social, physical and educational activities.

In conclusion, the current international recommended investment in childcare is 1% of GDP. Ireland only invests 0.2%. This gap is no longer tenable, and ICA believes the Irish Government must act to invest more. Despite the acknowledgement of the Minister for Children that the early learning and childcare costs is a significant burden for Irish parents, the department is not doing enough to alleviate this burden. The ICA calls for provision and management of state-run childcare the same as it provides Primary School Education. Only then will single parents be able to afford the kind of care they need to be able to choose the employment that best suits their lives, and not be economically imprisoned by overpriced childcare.

Study session 2: Policies which reach out to single parent realities

Rasa Zemaite, Coordinator, National Assembly of Active Mothers, Lithuania

Public policies in Lithuania are highly discriminatory towards single parent families and contribute to the persistence of a social stigma against this type of household. Politicians do not want to be associated with these families for fear of losing voters. Catholic religion and values are strong in Lithuania, and society is based on the concept of 'traditional families' and does not always consider new social realities adequately.

Beginning of 2019, the population age structure in all three Baltic countries was similar: children (aged 0–14) accounted for 15% of the total number of the resident population in Lithuania and, in Estonia and Latvia, these shares were nearly the same – 16%. The share of persons aged 65 and over, compared to the total population, was similar in all Baltic countries (20%). In all Baltic countries, births and marriages are increasingly postponed to a later age. Even though there has been population decline in the Baltics, in the past ten years (since

2008), total fertility rates in all three countries fluctuated. The total fertility rate of Lithuania increased the most – from 1.45 to 1.63 (2022 1,61). In Latvia, it also increased – from 1.59 to 1.61, while in Estonia it decreased from 1.72 to 1.67.

While in 2008, the mother’s average age at the first child’s birth was 25 years in all Baltic states (mean age at childbirth – around 28 years), by 2018, both indicators had increased. The highest mean age of women at the birth of the first child was highest in Estonia – 27.7 and 30.5 years respectively. In Latvia, the mean ages were 28 and 30.5 years and, in Lithuania, 27.8 and 30.1 years (2022: 28.2 and 30.3 years).

Lithuania has an exceptionally high marriage rates - the quite typical symbolic "starting point" for "the family" is broadly considered to be the marriage. Divorce rates are however also very high, **and the big challenge for Lithuania is indeed how to adequately target single parents with difficulties with appropriate support measures.** Challenges include how to assess whether divorced parents have stayed single - that is, are not living together with another adult earner -, or there is a second breadwinner in the family, different than the child's father. This difficulty in defining and monitoring the actual status of single parent families makes special measures in their favour an easy target for critics and has so far hampered the design of single parents' legislation. Lithuania continues to prefer sustaining both divorced parents than to create a strong individual single parent allowance.

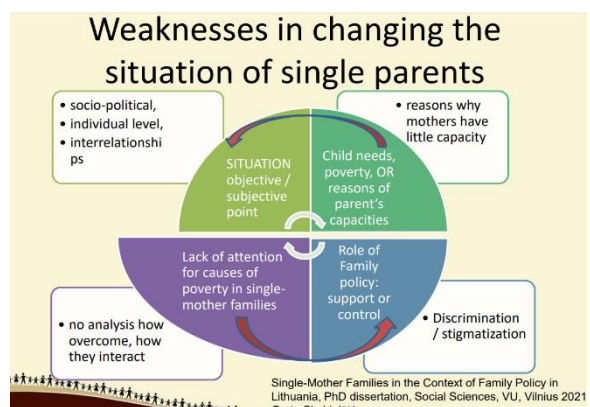
Another challenge is that women are automatically considered the primary caregiver in the family: 95% of the time women are assigned custody after the divorce, even when at risk of poverty, with limited opportunities to achieve work-life balance and increased risk of low-work intensity. This is less linked to gender-related factors (given that the gender employment gap is low in Lithuania) and rather to the lack of work-life reconciliation measures.

Rasa finished with a historical overview of policies to support single parent families. In 1995, all specialist targeted support for single parents stops since a strong stigma begins to be associated with single parenting and single parent families lack the advocacy resources necessary to gain centrality on the public policy agenda, their interests are too easily set aside in favour of those of groups with deeper, stronger political influence. Also, we should not play down the influence exerted on

public discourse by religious advocacy groups - little interested in promoting any family diversity agenda. **While developing an overarching family policy is positive overall, it does not mean that all family types are covered and, in practice, it can lead to data gaps on single parent families and the specific needs they may have.**

Social Benefits and Family Taxation are another crucial field which saw change. Since 1999 **family policy has become increasingly fragmented:** single parent families are not singled out as a privileged target group within the taxation framework and in general - due to the minimum income calculation system, which tends to favour the two-parent model, making it more complicated to qualify for social support.

Rasa finished by pinpointing the weaknesses or gaps which must be filled in order to develop more effective policies for single parents.



Public policy support for single parent families is poor and seemingly oblivious of their actual needs. This problem is compounded by lack of research into the situation of single-mother families, a lack of attention to the causes of poverty in single-mother families. Poverty is caused by the combination between absence of a second breadwinner, low-work intensity and a lack of childcare services, but there is no analysis of how to overcome these difficulties, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to other, as yet unexamined, difficulties and opportunities for the single child mothers and their children.

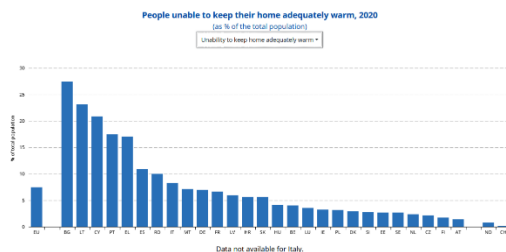
[Daniel Alvarez](#), Project Manager, [Isadora Duncan Single-Parent Foundation](#), Spain

Ensuring that policies reach out to single parent realities requires thinking beyond social or family policy, as already mentioned by other speakers. This presentation focused specifically on

mainstreaming the reality of single parent families in other areas such as energy policy, with a look at three principle areas which are central to addressing energy poverty of single parent households: Housing, Income, Energy Prices.

In relation to housing, Spain has one of the highest percentages of homeowners, yet more single parent families live in rented housing. Additionally, most housing is not originally designed for single parents, especially modern housing: there are on average 3 rooms per people living in one house, which translates in an excessive number of square metres per inhabitant and much higher warming expenses than necessary. Poor housing conditions also exist, largely due to the ageing of the housing stock: a large share of the housing stock was built more than 40 years ago, and one of the results is that nearly 20% of Spanish homes have a leaking roof. Rented housing tends to be, on average, poorly maintained compared to owner-occupied housing. **This poor state of housing in Spain has an obvious fallout in terms of energy efficiency: more than 10% of Spanish families are unable to keep their house adequately warm during winter months.** Housing cost overburden is further heightened by the fact that the majority of the population live in cities as opposed to rural areas.

How we live



In relation to income, from 2017-2021 the medium income per household in Spain has grown both in two-parent households with children and in other types of households, whereas for single parent households this has remained the same. Finally, in relation to energy prices for households, Spanish families pay among the highest price energy in Europe. As things stand, the whole European population is currently at risk of energy poverty. Social tariffs for energy provision were reviewed in 2017, but single parents were not specifically recognised in this review - only large families were considered in the review. Additionally, one of the principle problems of the new social tariff is that it is beneficial to families using energy systems such

as gas or diesel for heating systems, but not for electricity use as the main option.

Following this overview of the state of play of energy poverty related challenges in Spain, Daniel highlighted some key measures put forward to support single parent families in the field of energy poverty. Starting in 2018, some regional reforms in Spain recognised single parent families as a specific family type for the first time (in 6 regions out of 18). In 2018, a new piece of legislation introduced a new 'heating income' for families in vulnerable situations. Households are divided in groups based on income and receive a proportional allowance. The amount of the allowance depends on geographical variables as well. In 2019, Spain adopted a national strategy to tackle energy poverty, with single parent families recognised as a key target group. Finally, in 2022, there was a significant increase in the social support income cap for single parent families -> from 19.000 euro to more than 24.000 euros. This was great to improve access to social tariffs in energy provision, but another change occurred in the meantime: since March 2022, the social tariff is no longer designed for families but rather for households, which makes it more complex to calculate the incomes and more complex for the families. Additionally, if a family/ household have a problem in the present year they need to show they have been in a vulnerable situation for 12 months in order to access social tariffs.

Study session 3: Separation, mediation and blended families

Evelyn Martin, Honorary Chairperson, Austrian Platform for Single parents (ÖPA), Austria

The concern is that all forms of families can participate "fully" in social life and treated equally to other types of families, even if this in reality is still a dream for many. The main aim of the ÖPA is to give single parents, separated parents, patchwork families and their children a full voice, through pointing out the disadvantages and eliminating discrimination. The member organisations of ÖPA are providing counselling and supporting cases of partnership and family problems. These are a mix of women's and family organisations from church and society, but also family and children's/youth organizations in the federal provinces of Austria. These contribute to implementing economic justice and measures which support equality of family forms.

Evelyn Martin highlighted three examples of supports for separated families.

JUNO offers counselling for separated parents in all phases of their family life, and especially assistance in finding suitable housing for families. As housing costs are currently rising everywhere, this is a particularly important programme concerning single parents. JUNO is committed to its own housing projects for communal living for single and separated parents.

GIGAGAMPFA – Marriage and Family Center in Feldkirch, Vorarlberg, provides care for children who are experiencing family separation. The focus is primarily on children or adolescents who are going through major changes as a result of this familial separation (e.g. visitation arrangements, change of school and residence, restrictions and new partners of the parents). Children and adolescents react to this in very different ways, showing anger, sadness or fear, for example. They react with withdrawal, aggressiveness or sadness. Supporting and strengthening the children in this turbulent life situation is important and relieves the burden on father and mother.

FAmOs works with rainbow families, defending the interests of LGBTQI+ families to enforce equal rights. In Austria, there are more and more children living in same-sex relationships. While until now these were mostly children born into a previous, heterosexual relationship, the proportion of children born into an already existing same-sex relationships is steadily increasing. More and more LGBTQI people are fulfilling their desire for a life with children, their desire for family life. Nevertheless, rainbow families are not recognised enough by the public, there is a lack of social presence and a lack of equal status to other family constellations.

Following these specific support examples, Evelyn highlighted the specific federal nature of Austria, with each of the 9 federal provinces having their own regulations in certain areas such as social assistance, social support, subsidies, access to childcare, after-school care systems and more. This means that separated families will receive very different types of supports and recognition according to what province they live in and there are no equal rights for all Austrians and residents. However, ÖPA works at federal level with different ministries (family affairs, social affairs, women's affairs, justice) which work on family policy. Monitoring federal measures is essential to ensure that single parent families are fully included.

An example is the “climate bonus”.

Well-intentioned is not always good for everyone or “family is not family”

- A current example: the “climate bonus”:
- Each person in Austria for at least six months in 2022 will receive the climate bonus:

• Adults	€ 500
• Children	€ 250

What does it mean for families?



This climate bonus is applied in a discriminatory way since a family with two adults and one child will receive a higher bonus than a family with one adult and two children.

Two families in neighbouring flats in the same house:

- **Family A: Father, mother, one child**
500 + 500 + 250 gets € 1250
- **Family B: one single parent two children**
500 + 250 + 250 gets € 1000
- **What does that this mean?**
- **This is a clear discrimination against single people, especially against single parents.**



Ensuring that policies reach out to support single parent families, separated and blended families is more important than ever to address a number of challenges: increasing housing and energy prices, work-life imbalances, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is true that social benefits and private transfers help to reduce the negative impacts of these challenges for single-parent households. However, if there is no earned income, poverty and deprivation rates remain high even after receiving social and private transfers: this applies equally to single-parent and two-parent households. Moreover, still in Austrian family policy, it is unfortunately common that the term family means a private household with father-mother-child(ren). This means that the life situation of single parents and other forms of families is left out of measures that benefit families. The hope is that the European Child Guarantee will help boost awareness and effective implementation of measures for single parent, separated and blended families.

Christophe Cocu, Director, Ligue des Familles, Belgium

The organisation Ligue des Familles is an association of the French speaking part of Belgium with 30 000 families who are members. The Ligue aims to transform society on issues concerning all families, with parenting as the preferred approach. Their action is political with the intention of shaping public policies, and with services such as publishing magazines, organising workshops for parents, creating web applications for babysitting and more. According to a recent survey made by the Ligue, the main difficulties faced by single parent families include higher risk of poverty, work-life imbalance (especially where one adult is in charge of everything), loneliness and feelings of isolation, discrimination, difficulties to access information and help.

Single parent families in the French speaking part of Belgium represent %11 of Belgium's population. In 20 years (2002-2022), there has been an increase of 28% of new single parent households in Belgium. Statistically they are defined as a household where there are children residing and where only one adult is living together with the child(ren). But reality is different: when parents have a shared custody and the children are domiciled in one of the households, statistically there is one single parent family, but in reality, there are two.

For that reason, defining policies for single parent families can be challenging. The criteria and definitions vary according to the policies, such as the percentage of time that children are residing with one adult or another (do children need to be living 100% with one adult in order to be recognised as single parent family, or is 50% enough?), and should both parents benefit from State support if the children live only part-time with them? In housing policy: some administrations analyse whether the family is a single parent household according to an amicable agreement, while other administrations only consider a judgment of the family courts.

Christophe Cocu **highlighted how separations are settled in Belgium.** More than half of separated parents settle amicably while 31% resort to the justice courts (the fees for legal procedures acts as a deterrent for parents), and only 6% of parents use a mediation procedure (and the reasons for low take-up rates of mediation are unknown). As concerns child custody patterns, 31% of parents have equal child custody, 38% of parents are the

sole place of living for their children (in general, mostly women are fully in charge of their children) and 31 % have a different agreement.

In relation to blended families in French-speaking Belgium, 18% of all the families are blended families. They are the new large families: at least three children live under their roof. They are slightly less well off financially than families where children live with both their parents. There are a number of challenges to ensure policies fully support separated or blended families, and Christophe focused on two specific challenges: child support and housing.

In relation to child support, almost one out of two parents should perceive child support (45%). Mainly women. When Ligue asked parents why they do not receive child support, 34% said that they do not need child support, 25% said they did not dare to ask for this as they were afraid to make the relationship worse with the separated partner, 11% of respondents said they were paying child support. There are challenges with payments, namely 37% of the parents said they do not receive child support payments on a regular basis, and among these 15% never or almost never received payments (again, most of the time women are in this situation). Gezinsbond (Flemish League of Families) has developed a calculator to calculate child support, a system which is also used by the courts. Delayed payments create tensions between ex partners and create dependency situations that impoverish single parent families and increase child poverty. There is a state service, Secal, which helps parents recover child support when the other parent has not made payments for at least two months in the last year, and it grants advances in child support for families who do not receive the payments in time. However, there is room for improvement. This service is only accessible to families who earn 2200 euros income per month or less; it can be a long procedure to access the payments, which is also sometimes difficult to understand for parents; and moreover parents must pay to obtain help from Secal. This service is clearly not enough to ensure regular and efficient payment to families and needs to be improved namely 1. ensure that Secal is accessible to ALL families, making it universal no matter the income level and without any payment default condition nor a cap on advances. 2. By creating a register with all court decisions/official acts regarding separation that organise child support, as a way to facilitate access to information. 3. The creation of a free counselling service in charge of readjusting the amount of child support.

As regards housing, in 2021 Ligue worked on this with Ikea on a survey about single parents and housing. 7 out of 10 parents became single parents after a separation. 1 in 4 single parents took more than 6 months to find a new home. When becoming a single parent, there is a risk of becoming homeless (1 out of 20 parents). 17% of single parents sleep in the same room as one or more children (due to lack of space, and not by choice). 1 in 5 single parents spend more than half of their income on housing. 1 in 2 single parents had trouble paying for their accommodation in the past year.

To conclude, single parents and blended families are an ever-growing part of Belgium's households. Statistics on these types of families are currently based on households, which is why the family realities (e.g. living across multiple households) are not always visible or clearcut. Key recommendations to support positive outcomes for single parent families include (via *Maison des parents solos*, partner organisation of Ligue): effective payments of child support, access to affordable housing (via specific measures such as public housing, rent subsidies), access to affordable childcare services, better work-life measures, support in situations of family separation through access to five sessions of family mediation, five sessions of free legal advice, and five free sessions of psychological counselling.

Discussions with participants covered a number of topics, with child support coming to the fore as a challenge which must urgently be addressed: the fact that many single parents do not ask for child support to avoid conflicts with ex-partners; the incompatibility between child support and other State supports (which can be lost if child support is implemented); finally the reflection of child support realities in statistics related to poverty could be improved since poverty indicators are calculated as annual income, but with child support families live not year to year but month to month, so the poverty-related statistics can be misleading.

Study session 4: Housing solutions for social and economic integration

Kamila Šaffková, Family counsellor and mediator, Women 4 Women, Czechia

Women 4 Women are actively interested in the situation of single parents and housing. They are members of various initiatives, platforms and working groups, and also run projects where they directly and actively help with housing.

In Czechia, there is a great failure of municipalities in terms of housing. Although it is clearly stated in the Municipalities Act "The municipality is to take care of and create conditions for the development of social welfare and for meeting the needs of its citizens, and it is primarily concerned with meeting the need for housing, protection and development of health, transport and communications, the need for information, education and training, general cultural development and protection of public order." Unfortunately, in practice this is not happening. Most of the housing stock has been privatised, often under very non-transparent circumstances, so there is not much left in municipal ownership. Some municipalities have a fair system of allocating municipal housing, some have agreements with non-profit organisations that lease apartments and take responsibility for clients. Unfortunately, most municipalities behave as if providing housing is not their responsibility at all, and there are reports from all over the country that many municipal flats remain empty because municipalities do not want to deal with potentially problematic tenants. This includes single parents, for fear that they will not pay the rent, as well as families from the Roma population.

However, there are examples of good practices in Czechia such as the purchase of flats owned by the municipality (Chomutov, Ústí nad Labem, Velké Hamry); W4W cooperation with Prague 2 municipality where W4W rents the flats, works with clients and is responsible for the flats.

Family support and early intervention need to be strengthened. Furthermore, in Czechia there is a lack of public/municipal social work, which is unfortunately reduced to bureaucratic and formal procedures, workers are absolutely overloaded and no actual effective work with families is being done. The extreme consequence can be that instead of helping the family with housing and finances, children are taken away and end up in an orphanage where the monthly cost per child is 40-60.000,- CZK per month (EUR 1.630,- to 2.450,-), whereas if the family is given half of this amount, it can pay the rent and, above all, avoid family separation which is the worst consequence. Moreover, in the Civil Code, the removal of a child from a family for housing need is explicitly prohibited. **For this reason, it is crucial to put in place more effective prevention measures to support families and reduce the risk of poverty and exclusion, namely by detecting families and children at risk early.** In practice this means addressing the situation before the family has to move out of their home or cannot afford the rent and addressing the situation comprehensively. The Romani community tends to especially be excluded from supports, due to discrimination, and this is unacceptable.

Kamila highlighted the **urgent need to set up a network of affordable housing in Czechia, anchored in law in the form of a Social Housing Act.** Housing is a key and political issue given the current situation in the Czechia, where combined increasing housing costs and energy prices are making housing unaffordable for single parent families, and pushing them further into debt with the risk of intergenerational transmission of poverty. Without early interventions and supports to single parents, vicious circles can emerge making it more challenging to address their situation effectively with positive outcomes for both parent and child(ren).

Housing and employment are intrinsically linked. Single mothers are more at risk of poverty than single fathers, due to the fact that there is still a disparity between incomes: women do not have the same job opportunities as men, there is still little possibility of part-time work, women are more likely to be on maternity leave in about 85% of cases for up to 4 years, with difficulties returning to the labour market and in reconciliation between motherhood and employment. Additional challenges are similar to those mentioned by other speakers at the expert meeting: child support enforcement, lack of facilities for children under 3 years old to be financially (usually they are quite

expensive) and locally available, overcrowding in childcare. There are also conditionalities sometimes attached to childcare e.g. proving that the parent has employment, which is contradictory because the parent can only secure a job when they have full or part-time childcare. While there is a need for an increase in the supply of formal early childhood and education care in Czechia, there are still debates about whether it is appropriate or harmful to place children under the age of 3 in such facilities. **But for single parents, such childcare services are essential to allow them to secure employment and income.**

Examples of good practices do exist in Czechia in the field of social work in municipal services as regards social housing, individual planning and family budget planning, food and material assistance for people in need. Such practices need to be reinforced, and W4W will launch an e-learning programme to help single parents get correct and timely information on their housing and support options. **However, while non-profit organisations like W4W often provide social and housing supports (replacing the State services), they face structural difficulties** such as having to apply for funding annually (municipal budgets do not allow for multi-year budgets). Even where municipalities develop social housing projects (e.g. in Brno) local elections and changes may lead to the end of such projects.

[Nina Ould Ami, President of the Fédération Syndical des Familles Monoparentales, France](#)

In France, there are about 3 million single parent families. The improvement in the labour market situation in France in 2019 and the rise in wages have generally raised the standard of living of single-parent families. These families nevertheless remain much more frequently in a situation of monetary poverty. Single parent families have difficulty accessing housing for financial reasons. For financial reasons, they are overrepresented in emergency accommodation and 21% are affected by poor housing conditions. Faced with this situation, civil society organisations are trying to find solutions, bringing families together, leading workshops and supporting the families concerned.

The first problem is often lack of affordable and quality childcare. With a child under the age of three, access to a place in childcare or with a childminder often depends on having an employment contract, being in training or having adequate financial means. Such conditions create obstacles to accessing employment for single

parent families, because without childcare, it is impossible to work or even to take steps to access employment. The challenges to reconcile work and family life persist even as children grow older and attend school. The single mothers supported by the French federation of single parents tend to have low-skilled jobs, whose schedules are sometimes unsuited to school hours. With children at school from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm and a job in catering or in sales with extended hours, it can be complicated. There are extracurricular services, but they end at 6.30 pm or even 7 pm but someone has to pick up the child after that. So some single mothers are led to refuse jobs because they have no one to pick up their children from school.

When these families finally access housing, there is often a problem of adequacy between housing offers and the single-parent family model. In the Paris region, for example, it is rare for a single-parent family with low income to be able to live in an accommodation with one bedroom per person. Often, mothers sleep in the living room, or several children have to share the same room. Outside of the Paris region, in more rural regions, it is certainly easier to find suitable accommodation for single-parent families in terms of rental price and size of the accommodation, but some of the problems encountered in the Parisian region such as the difficulty of access to childcare, persists. And from there will arise the question of resources and housing typology. For example, a single parent with 3 children will be able to access low-rent social housing (depending on the rental stock) and benefit from a housing allowance (“APL”). But other problems will arise in terms of financial resources if there is no work, **so the emphasis is again on access to childcare.**

Access to decent housing for single parent families is also connected to mobility and transport. While it is easier to find affordable housing in the French provinces, the housing may also be far from city centres, with impacts on time and family budgets linked to the commute to school and work. Which in turn can put additional pressure on health and family life, and where the housing is overcrowded, this can lead to certain choices in terms of parental education (e.g. playing outside the home, screen-time).

Access to housing and childcare have an impact on employment outcomes for single parent families.

Having decent housing and childcare makes it easier to consider access to employment, to rethink a more serene professional and family future. Once again, it is the stabilisation in a place and the relief of the stress of the precariousness of accommodation that allows single parents to be able to think more serenely about the professional career they want to pursue and to have the time and the psychological availability to do so. Single mothers do not necessarily find work immediately but engage more easily in training to access more permanent jobs, long-term fixed-term contracts or even permanent contracts, even if they are often part-time, because such flexible work arrangements can be an effective solution for single parents with children in early years (in the absence of professional childcare services).

Solutions that already exist in France and/or are under discussion throughout France include:

- an ambitious and inclusive family policy with the creation of collective and individual childcare facilities (reevaluation made of the profession of childminder);
- the continuous development of social housing;
- shared housing facilities, grouping together to rent the same accommodation and thus sharing the costs in order to reduce the costs of accommodation, break with loneliness, pool efforts and resources, and find mutual support to also lighten the mental load of single parents (but there can also be disadvantages : it is necessary to agree on obligations that stem from a shared accommodation)
- the development of public modes of transport to further facilitate mobility for work and social life;
- raising companies' awareness to take better account of single-parent situations (e.g. through adapted working hours or telework if possible).

In general, discussions are especially needed with public authorities, institutions, companies, social landlords... around the reconciliation of family life, professional life and social life because “family” is and will remain the place of all the beginnings in life.

Conclusions and next steps: comprehensive solutions for intersecting vulnerabilities of single parents

Camille Roux, Policy and Advocacy officer,
COFACE Families Europe

Single parent households, as mentioned throughout the expert meeting, are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion. The latest Eurostat data are clear: over two fifths (42.1 %) of the EU population living in single adult households with dependent children was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020. The expert meeting helped to shed light on the reasons for this. The vulnerabilities that these families face are diverse and can impact every aspect of their life, so there is no straightforward, single miracle solution to address it but multiple, multi-layered and elaborate ones. These solutions are easier to ignore than to design. Yet, the expert meeting speakers highlighted the importance of building effective policies for single parents, and how well-designed policies can make a difference. Solutions do exist, but it is sometimes civil society organisations which step up to fill the gaps created, or left, by public authorities.

These multi-layered multi-faceted vulnerabilities that single parent households face also means that there are multiple actions that can be taken, reflected in the way policies are drafted, embracing family diversity instead of erasing it.

COFACE advocates for families not solely within the remit of family policies, and not even solely on social policies, but is trying as much as possible to enter the policy debates in many key areas affecting families and to bring the whole-family lens to discussions on energy poverty, employment, financial inclusion, digitalization, education, migration and more. Thus, the inputs from the expert meeting will be taken to EU policy discussions in these different fields, urging policy makers and partners to include single parent families from the start in policy making. In the European Child Guarantee for instance, different national action plans include measures for single parent families. The announcement that there will be a list of measures for single parents in the upcoming Czech action plan goes in the right direction (e.g. fast-track access to ECEC, housing, social supports); the region of Brussels in Belgium has announced measures to tackle discrimination

in access to housing for single parent families; in Spain the plan mentions the adaptation of ECEC timetables and attendance options and care modalities for single parents families; and children growing up in single parent households are a specific target group for the Estonian plan.

The importance of housing and energy were highlighted by different speakers (Isadora Duncan Single-Parents Foundation, French Federation of single parents, and Women4Women, Ligue des Familles, ÓPA), in the wave of the current energy crisis, at the EU level and in all EU countries. There simply cannot be an expert meeting on single parents without mentioning the war in Ukraine and its consequences, as it has been done by many speakers. Every war is a war against children, every war is a war against families, this is no difference and when looking at the statistics of people fleeing Ukraine, policies for single parents become even more relevant. As uncertainty about the future of these families is still unfortunately high, it poses the questions of intersecting vulnerabilities that also of course exist in single parent families. This means especially designing responses for single parent families that are facing extra vulnerabilities: refugees, families with children with disabilities, family carers from single parent households, families with migrant background, rainbow families without recognised parenthood. How to integrate these specificities in advocacy on single parent families?

Many challenges were highlighted during the expert meeting: inadequate access to childcare, lack of child support enforcement, lack of work-life reconciliation measures, lack of adequate housing for single parents with financial consequences linked to the energy crisis, stigmatisation of single parent families, lack of clear definitions of single parenthood, poorly designed policies for family diversity, the disproportionate number of single mothers, to mention some.

Many solutions were also highlighted. The work of NAMS in Lithuania highlights the need to integrate single parent families in policy design from the start, complemented by research and data to better understand the realities of single parent families. Ending any stigma around single parenthood, as highlighted also by the Irish Countrywomen's Association, came up in most speaker presentations. The work of the Single Parents Centre in Budapest puts mental health and self-care at the fore, both for children and their parents, as basis for a wide range of supports: health, employment, housing, childcare. Ligue des Familles

put the spotlight on investments in child support and access to affordable housing for single parents, as well as access to childcare and family mediation services. Measures must be reviewed in family policy, namely to reinforce early intervention and family supports for single parents, to prevent them from falling into poverty and exclusion, as highlighted by Women4Women. But measures must also be reviewed beyond family policy also in social policy as highlighted by Rense Nieuwenhuis in his introduction; and further afield in areas which clearly impact the living situations and well-being of single parent families such as energy costs, but also education and mobility as highlighted by the French Federation of Single parents. Providing clear legal frameworks for access to social housing, coupled with clear channels of information to ensure single parent families know their rights, came out strongly from Women4Women. Investments in affordable and quality childcare was emphasised in all presentations, as a positive first trigger for single parents to access employment and afford housing costs. Namely childcare which is not attached to conditionalities such as already being in paid employment or training.

ÖPA put the emphasis on the European Child Guarantee as a new opportunity to help boost awareness and effective implementation of measures for single parent, separated and blended families, highlighted as a priority target group in the upcoming Czech action plan on the Child Guarantee. Implementation will especially be supported through strong partnerships with municipalities and NGOs. However, it is important to ensure that NGOs providing social, health and housing support have sustainable funding contexts to allow them to work effectively (e.g. through multi-annual funding frameworks at municipal, regional or national level).

Last, but not least, single parenthood has a strong gender equality component. The vulnerability factor of single parenthood should be erased, ensuring that this can also be a choice or life path, and not a source of risk for both parents and children. The risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion is keeping so many women in dangerous and difficult situations. Working on single parent families is also working on a situation where we totally embrace the idea that families nowadays are more fluid structures not only in the sense of what we see at a certain moment in time in society but over time, and that any transition period should not put any member of the family at risk. As family organisations, COFACE members are there for families to accompany them in these transitions, as

highlighted by the ICA with the role of multi-generational solidarity and the role that grand parents have in Ireland stepping up to support families. In this regard, single parenthood is a broader topic than just looking at the parent-child dynamics, and should be addressed with a life-course perspective in mind.

Further reading

COFACE resources

[COFACE Disability policy brief \(2022\)](#)

[Work-life balance directive assessment \(2022\)](#)

[Family TeamWork campaign \(2022\)](#)

[COFACE expert meeting on the position of larger families with children in society: strengths and barriers \(2022\)](#)

[Child Compass 2030: Shaping a healthy society, environment and economy fit for children \(2020\)](#)

[New deal for ECEC \(2018\)](#)

European Union resources

[Skills4Parents online Hub \(2022\)](#)

[European Pillar of Social Right \(2017\)](#)

[European Pillar of Social Rights action plan \(2021\)](#)

[Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee](#)

[EU work-life balance directive \(2019\)](#)

[Child Guarantee action plans](#)

[Child Guarantee coordinators](#)

[European Social Fund Plus](#)



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