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Directions of thought for single parents in the EU

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ABSTRACT

This policy note highlights contemporary research on single parents, and reflects on its implications for social policy developments in the European Union. Three directions of thought are developed regarding single parents' resources, employment and social policies. The aim is to expand the scope of choice among policy alternatives for policy makers. The rise of shared residence urges us to reconsider the gendered nature of single parenthood, considering how to support separated fathers to be involved in their children's life. Employment can come with all kinds of advantages, but earnings are often inadequate for single parents to guarantee a poverty-free existence. With respect to redistributive social policies, single parents' economic position can be heavily affected by policies that are not specifically designed for single parents, or even for families with children. This brings into focus, analogue to gender mainstreaming, the importance of mainstreaming family diversity.

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Introduction

Single parenthood is gendered, and it is often reported that 85% of single-parent households are headed by women. Single parenthood comes with social risks that include poverty, material deprivation, and challenging work-life balance. Single parenthood comes with concerns about the next generation (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008), as their socio-economic disadvantage is also linked to challenges in the development and well-being of their children. As such, it is no surprise that single parents are often at the centre of policy debates, and can be considered as a 'litmus test' (Horemans & Marx, 2018, p. 195) of effective social protection. In recent decades, social policy in Europe has increasingly emphasised the importance of employment (Morel et al., 2012) and has been characterised by welfare state retrenchment and austerity (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017), while at the same time single parenthood has become more common and their poverty risks increased. This policy note highlights contemporary research on single parents, and reflects on its implications for social policy in the European Union. The goal is not to recommend specific policies. Instead, the aim is to provide directions of thought, expanding the scope of choice among policy alternatives (Pielke, 2007).

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Single parents face a triple bind of inadequate resources, employment and social policy (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). Compared to for instance two-parent families, single parents are more likely to have a low level of education and lack a partner as second caregiver or earner in the household. Single parents have high employment rates, but have more difficulties to cope with increasingly precarious labour markets characterised by gender inequality – such as pay gaps. When it comes to social policies, single parents in many countries face the gendered disadvantage of family policies based on the traditional breadwinner model, and it remains to be seen how the increased emphasis on work and activation in social policy plays out for single parents. To understand the position of single parents, we need to *combine* the perspectives on resources, employment, and social policy. There are no simple solutions to complex problems.

Resources

Although the vast majority of single-parent households continue to be headed by mothers, gender relations are changing. We can examine different countries to learn how they embrace the resulting family diversity. In Sweden it is increasingly common that children of separated parents live equal amounts of time with both parents. Not once in a while, not a day in the week, but equal amounts of time. The rise is remarkable, as the share of children from separated parents in shared residence went up in just two decades from 4% in 1992 to 35% in 2012 (Fransson et al., 2018). We have no clear understanding yet what caused this, but it aligns with changes in the Swedish family law making joint custody the default, and parental leave policy that reserves months of leave to be taken by fathers. We know that fathers who take leave, and are involved in the care for their children, continue to have greater involvement with their children throughout their lives (Duvander & Jans, 2009), and we know that fathers continue to take parental leave in Sweden even after they separated from the mother of their children (Duvander & Korsell, 2018). This development in shared residence is not unique to Sweden, and is also observed in for instance Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, the UK, and Italy.

What is perhaps most important, is that this development seems to be very good for the children. Children who live in shared residence arrangements do well. They do much better than children who live solely with one single parent, and in many aspects these children are on par with children whose parents did not separate (Fransson et al., 2018). This applies to aspects of wellbeing such as having an own room, psychological and psychosomatic wellbeing and health behaviour. The beneficial outcomes of shared residence have now been replicated in many studies in different contexts (Baude et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2014).

It is far too early to make strong policy recommendations in this regard. In some situations, there can be very good reasons to not have both parents involved in the care for a child – including from a child's perspective. The parents in the research mentioned above initiated this living arrangement themselves, and make it work. That is something different than a policy that encourages – or even requires – other parents to do the same. So, what can we learn from this? We may need to reconsider the gender dimension of single parenthood. Fathers are increasingly involved in the care for their children, and the recent EU Directive on Work-Life Balance actively seeks to promote fathers' involvement. This

Directive came into force on 1 August 2019, ‘with the aims better supporting a work-life balance for parents and carers, encouraging a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women, and addressing women’s underrepresentation in the labour market [...] Under the directive, fathers must be able to take at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of their child, compensated at least at the level of sick pay. Two out of the four months of parental leave are non-transferable between parents ...’¹ This has the potential to strengthen families, and may foster fathers’ continued involvement with their child(ren), also after separation (Duvander & Jans, 2009). However, it should also be pointed out that we know very little about this – in part because it is not included in the EU social indicators. To monitor and understand how single-parent families are evolving, and how to best support these developments, we need to collect better data to improve our indicators.

Employment

Stimulating employment is one of the 5 key objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy², and is thought to come with various positive social outcomes – such as avoiding poverty. Table 1 shows rates of inadequate earnings and poverty rates among *employed* single parents in six European countries. These indicators are based on the Luxembourg Income Study Database (LIS, 2020), that provide nationally representative surveys on income. The EU definition of at-risk-of-poverty was used, indicating individuals living in a household with an equivalized disposable income below 60% of the national median income. Single parents were defined as one parent living with one or more dependent children but without a partner in the household (other relatives can live with the single parent).

The rates of inadequate earnings indicate how many single parents are working, but still have earnings below the poverty line. Although for many a job is much more than just a pay check, these results show that on pay day, jobs are often inadequate for single parents (Jaehrling et al., 2015). Half of *working* single parents in Ireland would live in poverty were it only for their earnings, and more than 1 in 6 in Denmark and 1 in 4 in Finland (also see, for Finland: Jalovaara & Fasang, 2019).

Employment helps protect against poverty, but employment growth is no guaranteed remedy against high poverty rates (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019). Particularly when you rely on only one income, it matters a great deal in which country you are employed, and how well your employment is supported by public policies. Further analyses suggest that rates of inadequate earnings – among the employed – were lower in countries that have stricter

Table 1. Inadequate earnings and poverty among working single parents (%).

	Inadequate Earnings	Poverty
Denmark (2016)	14	7
Finland (2016)	26	11
Estonia (2013)	31	20
Luxembourg (2013)	40	28
United Kingdom (2016)	42	16
Ireland (2010)	51	9

Data for selected countries updated from Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018a) to include most recent data available.

Source: LIS Data (2020).

Poverty was defined as having an equivalized disposable household income below 60% of the national median income.

Inadequate earnings were defined as gross income from work below the poverty line.

job protection regarding the use of fixed-term contracts (for instance Norway and Spain), and family policies such as in the Nordic countries with longer paid parental leave and more public support for childcare (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018a). Single parents do not only benefit from paid leave and childcare when their children are still young enough to qualify (Zagel & Hübgen, 2018). These policies also help promote a gender-equal division of labour within the household of couples, which strengthens their future position in the labour market as single parent in case of a relationship dissolution (Van Lancker, 2018).

Inadequate earnings do not necessarily mean that these single parents live in poverty, because redistributive social policy can repair some of this inadequacy. The at-risk-of-poverty rates in Table 1 show the actual percentage of single parents in poverty, that is: after receiving benefits and transfers (in addition to their earnings). These are the working poor. In sum, these results show that transfers and benefits are indispensable for single parents, even when they are working. The next section takes a closer look at these redistributive social policies.

Redistributive social policies

Table 2 shows the poverty reduction associated with child support and with family benefits. Using the same data as above, the impact of these policies on poverty was determined by subtracting the amount of child support or family benefits from a household's disposable income, and then evaluating how many additional single parents would have been in poverty had it not been for the income from those respective policies. Child support is an example of a policy that was designed specifically for (the children of) separated parents. These transfers between households are associated with modest poverty reductions – they are the highest in Denmark, which guarantees advance maintenance payments. Poverty among single parents is reduced more – in some countries substantially more – by family benefits. This is commonly reported in the literature: transfers and benefits aimed at all families with children tend to be associated with larger poverty reductions than those designed specifically for single parents (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). It is thus important to expand the scope of analyses of the socio-economic position of single parents beyond the policies that are often not directly associated with this group. This also includes, for instance, unemployment benefits as is illustrated in the case of Sweden.

Like the other Nordic countries, Sweden is often considered a country with a universal and generous welfare state, and low poverty and inequality. When it comes to promoting

Table 2. Poverty reduction associated with child support and family benefits (%-point).

	Child Support	Family Benefits
Denmark (2016)	–4	–6
Finland (2016)	–2	–9
Estonia (2013)	–1	–1
Luxembourg (2013)	–2	–6
United Kingdom (2016)	–2	–14
Ireland (2010)	0	–30

Data for selected countries updated from Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018a) to include most recent data available. Year of the data in parentheses.

Source: LIS Data (2020).

Table 3. Poverty and unemployment benefits in Sweden (%).

	Poverty: Single Parent	Poverty: Couple with children	Net replacement Rate	Benefit receipt rate
1990	6	4	86	87
2000	13	6	69	83
2010	28	8	64	45

Data for selected years derived from (Alm et al., 2019). Poverty was defined as having an equivalized disposable household income below 60% of the national median income. Sources: HEK Data (Swedish register data), Swedish Public Employment Agency & CWED.

gender equality, this is the case more than ever. But when it comes to countering economic inequality, things have rapidly changed.

Table 3 shows the increase in relative income poverty among single parents in Sweden. This trend is similar among singles without children (not shown), but much less dramatic among couples with or without children. Sweden experienced a major economic crisis in the early 1990s that did not directly result in much higher poverty rates despite high unemployment rates among single parents. However, *after* the economy by and large recovered from the crisis, poverty increased rapidly among single adults and single parents. Unemployment was much higher during the crisis in the 1990s than it was in the first decade of the new millennium – and that peak in unemployment hardly contributed to more poverty. However, in more recent years unemployment brought a much larger risk of poverty risk than in earlier years. This was linked to changes in the Swedish unemployment insurance benefits. The net replacement rates, which is the percentage of last wages someone with an average wage would get, declined from nearly 90% in the early 1990s to just over 60% in 2010. But not everyone receives these benefits. In the 1990s, about 90% of the unemployed received unemployment benefits, whereas in 2010 this was 45%. The drop in benefit receipt was particularly notable after 2006, when the qualification criteria for insurance-based unemployment benefits were made more strict.

So, this is what happened. During the crisis in the 1990s, unemployment rates were very high, but all family types were protected against poverty. Then, unemployment benefits were lowered and made less accessible. In the Swedish dual-earner society this was not so much a problem for couples, who often had an additional earner in the household who could help compensate for the income loss that comes with unemployment. Single parents, however, lack such additional earner – just like single adults. Together, these trends in unemployment policies can explain about half of the upward trend in single parents' poverty in Sweden – other factors also play a role. But it does highlight that the situation of single parents can be strongly affected by policies that were not designed specifically for them. Unemployment benefits have traditionally been associated with inequality of class, rather than gender, and are often missing from evaluations of single parenthood.

Conclusion

Single parents face a triple bind of inadequate resources, employment, and policies. In this policy note, the aim was not to provide a comprehensive overview of what is needed for single parents in the EU. Instead, for each of the triple binds, directions of thought were developed that are underrepresented in the policy discourse on single parents.

With respect to *resources*, we saw the example of fathers being increasingly involved in the care for their children – also after separation. This suggests that we need to reconsider the gendered nature of single parenthood, address the contribution fathers can make more prominently, and consider how policies can support them to do so. We still know very little about this at the level of the European Union, though, in part because it is invisible to the EU social indicators. *Employment*, secondly, can come with all kinds of advantages, but earnings are often inadequate for single parents to guarantee a poverty-free existence. This means that also working single parents often have to rely on redistributive *policies*. When it comes to these transfers and benefits, finally, single parents' economic position can be heavily affected by policies that are not specifically designed for single parents, or even for families with children. This brings into focus, analogue to gender mainstreaming, the importance of mainstreaming family diversity.

Notes

1. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9438&langId=en> (last visited 16 March 2020).
2. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_headline_indicators (last visited 16 March 2020).

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Rense Nieuwenhuis, associate professor in sociology at the Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI) at Stockholm University, examines how family diversity and social policy affect poverty and economic inequality. Typically, his research is country-comparative and has a gender perspective. His recent focus was on single-parent families, how women's earnings affect inequality between households, and family policy outcomes.

He published in journals such as *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *European Sociological Review*, *Acta Sociologica*, and *Review of Income and Wealth*. Recently, he co-edited the book 'The triple bind of single-parent families' and he is currently co-editing the 'Palgrave Handbook of Family Policy'. Occasionally, he acts as independent expert doing commissioned work on gender equality for organisations such as UN Women, the European Commission, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

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