



Peer Review on 'Peer Review on 'Single mothers facing poverty: Providing adequate financial, material and social support for sustainable social integration'

5-6 October 2017, Genk (Belgium)

Short report

The Peer Review discussed policy approaches and measures to help single mothers facing poverty, in particular by providing adequate financial, material and social support for sustainable social integration. The event was hosted by the Belgian Federal Public Service Social Security (FPS Social Security) bringing together government representatives and peer country representatives from eleven countries, namely Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal, and Romania, and an independent expert from Sweden. Representatives from the European Commission, the Public Planning Service (PPS) Social Integration, Dutch-Speaking Women's Council, Federation of Public Social Welfare Centres (PSWC) of the Brussels-Capital Region, Union of Cities and Municipalities of Walloon Region (UWCW) also participated in the Peer Review.

In all countries, single-parent families' poverty rate is substantially higher than among two-parent families, according to the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) indicator. This defines someone at risk of poverty when living in household with a disposable income (corrected for the number of household members) below the poverty threshold at 60% of the national median household income. In countries with the highest AROP rate, almost one in two single parent families live in poverty.

Single parenthood is strongly gendered. First, a large majority (approximately 85%) of single-parent families are headed by women. Women also experience gendered disadvantage, for instance in the labour market and in relation to gendered assumptions in social policy. Paid employment is a key contributor to, but not a sufficient condition for, single parents' well-being. In addition to the quality of employment, additional factors, including the availability of child care facilities, social support, adequate housing and access to health care also play a crucial role.

One of the key elements of the European Pillar of Social Rights adopted in April 2017 is an initiative to address the work-life balance challenges faced by working parents and carers. The proposal for a Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers includes a number of highly relevant measures of single mothers, including the introduction of a carers' leave and the right to request flexible working arrangements, and also aims to make a better use of European funds to improve long-term and

childcare services. The Active Inclusion strategies at the Member States level further elaborate specific ways for the integration of single mothers. Although the Commission Recommendation on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market was adopted in 2008, the key messages remain highly relevant today, including the need for an integrated approach combining adequate income support, individual job search support, tackling in-work poverty, access to employment activation measures, access to quality social services, as well as to healthcare, housing and affordable and good quality childcare services.

The Belgian Government considers the social integration of single mothers an important social policy issue, primarily through universal social protection. One out of four families in Belgium is a single-parent family compared to a European average of about one out of six. One in two single parent families in Belgium was at-risk-of-poverty in 2016, a ratio 2,6 times higher than for the total population. Poverty appears to be more long-term phenomenon in this social group, with high relative rates of persistent poverty, and also high occurrence of material deprivation. Social security benefits (including family benefits, unemployment insurance, vacation payment and other benefits) are relatively generous universal benefits, but reach only those single mothers who are eligible due to (previous) employment. In addition, the means-tested social protection system, the last “safety net”, ensures all a minimal income. It includes a minimum income scheme and guaranteed family benefits. Women “living exclusively with one or more unmarried minor children” represent close to 17% of all minimum income beneficiaries, compared to 2,1% men in the same sub-category (PPS Social integration statistics, 2015 data). Single mothers are generally younger, are less qualified and have to deal with stronger discrimination and/or stereotypes on the labour or on the housing markets, leading to a multi-dimensional exclusion.

In order to address the complexity of the problem, a pilot project named MIRIAM was launched in September 2015 in five Public Social Welfare Centres in Belgium. The target group is single mothers that benefit from the support of the PSWC in the form of a minimum income revenue or in the form of another type of support. The project provided intensive case management, both at individual and at collective level, and aimed to increase the empowerment of women and, as a consequence, durable social integration. The target group is supported during a period of minimum 8 months by locally appointed ‘case managers’. Their role was to assess the participants’ needs and develop a tailored response in the form of individual and or collective support and guidance. Approximately 60 single mothers participated in year one and 70 in year two.

The key learning messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:

- Single parenthood is strongly gendered as the majority of parents raising children alone are women. They are also at a disproportionate risk of poverty. Even when in paid employment, single mothers often have earnings that are insufficient to lift them out of poverty.
- Single parents disproportionately face a ‘triple bind’: the combination of inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies to secure well-being. The evidence suggests that although there are clearly challenges that are unique to single-parent families, much of their needs are common to other types of families as well.

- Single mothers are not a homogenous group in terms of age, level of education or whether they chose to become single parents; consequently, their needs differ. With respect to how single mothers' needs have been considered in policies and programmes that aim to fight poverty, the Peer Review found that there is often a gap between policy declarations and practice.
- Policies and institutions that support families with children (such as paid parental leave and childcare) and those in the labour force (such as active labour market policies to support workers; generous, longer unemployment benefits; adequate social assistance and strong unions) were also found to be of particular importance to prevent poverty faced by single parents.
- Single parents tend to do well in countries with institutions that support gender and class equality. Scientific evidence suggests that higher national levels of gender equality lead to a lower level of poverty faced by single mothers.
- Children growing up in single-parent families were found to experience lower levels of well-being compared to children growing up in coupled families. These differences could be explained by their parent's level of education, occupation, and material possessions.
- In several European countries — including Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Belgium — fathers have become increasingly involved in the lives of their children after separation, often in the form of shared residence (with the child alternating between the homes of both parents). These observations challenge the very definition of many single-parent families as being headed by one parent. On the other hand, these trends seem to be incipient, and mothers still carry most of the care responsibilities for their children after separation.
- Alimony guaranteed by the state ensures direct payment to an eligible mother who does not receive alimony from the father. However, challenges remain in ensuring its implementation, primarily in relation to the role of the state in providing alimony which is the father's responsibility. State policies should not discourage the involvement (both financial and personal) of fathers bringing up their children.
- Recent studies report that as long as adequate levels of redistribution are ensured, supplementary measures targeting (poor) single parents result in the most effective poverty reduction. However, targeted (means-tested) benefits need to address the issue of inadequate take-up, and avoid stigma/shame around accessing benefits/support.
- Transitional benefits can improve income security and enable transition to work/training. Challenges include the determination of the length of the 'transition' period and the provision of integrated services.
- Adequate minimum income schemes need to be raised to an adequate level, while ensuring work incentives.
- Social inclusion of mothers beyond monetary support is essential, including employment and social connections.
- Although employed single mothers are less likely to be in poverty, there are a number of risk factors related to precarious employment, low wages and less favourable employment conditions that affect those with a low level of education in particular. Thus, employment policies (e.g. part-time parity, measures for tackling precarious employment, ensuring fair wages and working conditions) and policies that ensure work-life balance, are an inherent part of a desirable policy mix.

- Flexible childcare arrangements can improve a child's development and well-being and also increase labour market opportunities for single mothers. On the other hand, a number of challenges remain, including affordability, flexibility, accessibility, quality and facing cultural barriers.
- A holistic approach with respect to the social integration of mothers with cumulative disadvantage requires coordination in both the design and implementation of policies among different institutions. One-stop shops can improve access to rights and information, but they imply challenges in bringing together different organisational cultures and in streamlining knowledge among social workers.
- In addition to individual support measures, the use of collective/group-level support is to be encouraged. Such a collective approach is especially well-suited to help single mothers overcome their isolation through sharing of experiences with others who face similar problems and find support within the group.
- Training of case managers and social workers is crucial. Gender equality training is of particular importance considering the strong gender dimension of single parenthood.
- Scientific evaluation of policies and pilot projects is necessary to ensure that spending makes the largest social impact. We need to be careful what we call "best practice". Quantitative evidence, for example additional detailed family-specific data in the EU-SILC survey, would enable more in-depth cross-country comparisons.