



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

Belgium, 5 & 6 October 2017

Single parents in Europe need resources, employment and supportive social policies

Thematic Paper

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

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Executive Summary

This thematic paper demonstrates the poverty risks single parents face in the 28 EU Member States, and discusses various explanations for their increased risk of poverty. Their resources, such as level of education, are very important for the well-being of single parents and their families, but can only provide a partial explanation for their reduced (socio-economic) well-being. Employment can be associated with beneficial outcomes, but was shown not to be a sufficient condition for socio-economic well-being for all single parents and only in the context of social policies that support employment. Redistributive policies remain uncontestedly important for single parents. Single parents tend to do well in countries with institutions that support gender equality and class equality.

1 Introduction

Single-parent families¹, the majority of whom are headed by women, face greater risks of poverty, material deprivation, and other forms of impaired well-being (such as poor self-reported health, less work-family balance among working single parents, and impaired emotional well-being and cognitive development of children growing up with a single parent), compared to various other common types of families.² Yet, at the same time, their chances to achieve well-being are closely linked to those of other families. This thematic paper will describe the socio-economic position of single parents in European countries, and summarize several key debates and findings in the academic literature on what support is available to single parents and what contributes to explaining their impaired well-being.

¹ Important parts of this thematic paper are based on the forthcoming book *The Triple Bind of Single-Parent Families: resources, employment and policies to improve well-being*, edited by Rense Nieuwenhuis and Laurie C. Maldonado. The book will be published by Policy Press in 2018. The author of this thematic paper acknowledges the intellectual contribution by Laurie C. Maldonado.

² The term 'single-parent family' is used to represent families headed by a single adult, who is the parent to one or more of the children. The single parent can have a (new) partner, but according to the definition used here, that partner cannot live in the same household. Other adults, for instance grandparents, can live in the household as well. In the UK, the term 'single parent' (rather than the often used lone parent) refers to adults who were single when they became a parent, and this terms can be used in a derogatory manner (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001; Treanor, 2018). The definition used in this paper does not make that distinction, nor does it intend to imply any normative connotations.

2 Setting the scene

Single parenthood is strongly gendered. First and foremost, a large majority of approximately 85% of single-parent families are headed by women (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). This percentage varies across countries, from a relatively low 76% in Hungary and 81% in Sweden and Norway, to comparatively high of 97.5% in Estonia, 96% in the Czech Republic and 95% in Germany (OECD, 2011 – data pertain to 2004/2005). Moreover, as it will be made clear in this thematic paper, the socio-economic well-being of single parents is, in part, related to the gendered disadvantage women experience – for instance in the labour market and in relation to gendered assumptions in social policy. Indeed, single mothers are more likely to face poverty than single fathers (Gornick & Jäntti, 2010), as well as aspects of material deprivation such as being unable to face unexpected financial expenses (single mothers 71%; single fathers 41%), or being unable to afford a holiday (single mothers 54%, single fathers 38%), a car (single mothers 22%; single fathers 8%), or meat or proteins (single mothers 16%; single fathers 9%) (EIGE, 2016). However, due to data limitations most (country-comparative) studies on single parents are unable to differentiate between single mothers and single fathers; hence, this distinction often cannot be made in this thematic paper either.

The figure A shows the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates (Atkinson, Cantillon, Marlier, & Nolan, 2002; Foster, Greer, & Thorbecke, 1984) of single-parent families and two-parent families in the 28 EU Member States. These AROP rates represent a relative measure of poverty. Someone is considered 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. It is one of the official indicators used by the European Commission to monitor poverty in Europe, and progress towards the Europe 2020 targets. The poverty risks in Panel A pertain to the year 2015.³ Single parents have the lowest risk of living in poverty in the Finland, with about 1 in 6 single parents living in poverty, followed by Denmark, Cyprus and Austria. Single parents' risks of poverty are highest in Lithuania, with almost 1 in 2 living in poverty. Other countries with high poverty risks for single parents include Malta, Luxembourg and Romania. Belgium takes a middle position, with a poverty risk of approximately 35%. Although not shown here, poverty among single-parent families was found to be on the rise in many European countries, including (but not limited to) Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). In all countries, single-parent poverty is substantially higher than among two-parent families.

Figure B shows the association between the poverty risks for single parents (as shown in Figure A) and a general gender equality index of these same countries⁴. The data show that single parents are less at risk of poverty in countries that score relatively well

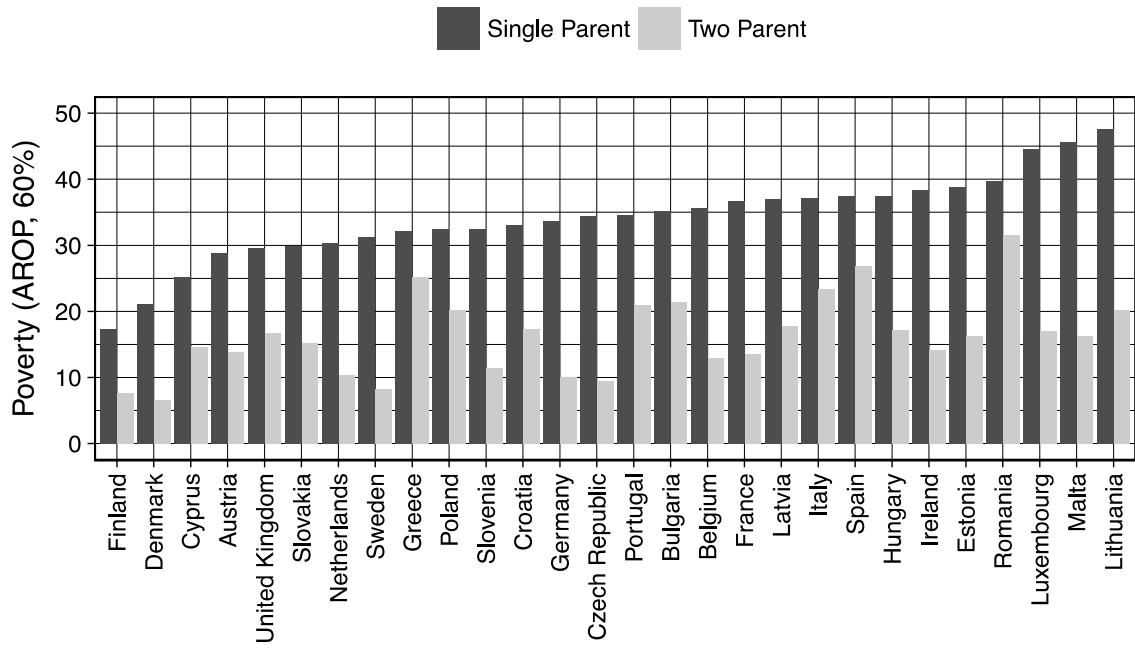
³ The data for these figures were obtained from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and their online database containing the Gender Equality Index & Gender Statistics. The GINI coefficients pertained to 2015, and the gender equality index (due to data availability) to 2012.

⁴ The Gender Equality Index captures various dimensions of gender (in)equality, and is a composite measure of several indicators in the domains of (gender equality in) Work, Money, Knowledge, Time usage, Power, and Health (Humbert et al., 2015).

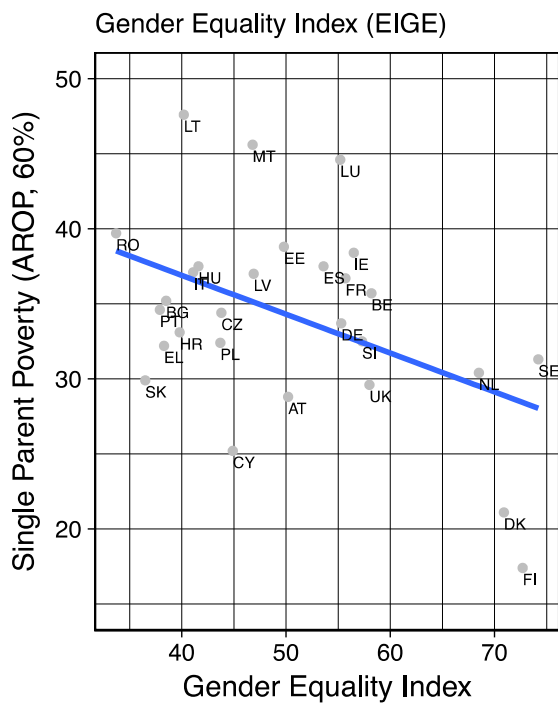
on the gender equality index, such as the Netherlands and the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Naturally, the association is not perfect, with for instance Finland and Cyprus showing much lower poverty than would have been expected based on their level of gender equality, and for instance Luxembourg much higher. In Figure C, poverty risks of single parents are related to the level of income inequality among *all* individuals in a country. The results show that single parents are better off in countries that achieve low levels of economic inequality among all their citizens. All in all, these findings corroborate the notion that single parents generally do well in countries (with institutions) that support low inequality of gender and of class (Cooke, 2017; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). This 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.

The remainder of this thematic paper will summarize research findings on what explains the well-being — or lack thereof — of single-parent families across (European) countries. In line with existing literature on single parents, well-being is mostly understood here in (socio-)economic terms such as being at risk of poverty, being employed, having a middle-class income, and being wealthy. These indicators are supplemented by research findings on the impact on children (emotional well-being, cognitive development, and school-test performance) and self-reported health, work-life balance and experienced job-security. The central argument is that single parents disproportionately face a '*triple bind*': the combination of inadequate resources, inadequate employment, and inadequate policies to secure well-being (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). The concept of single parents' triple bind is considered useful here to structure the review of the literature into sections on resources, on employment (in policy context), and on (redistributive) social policy, and to emphasize their interdependence.

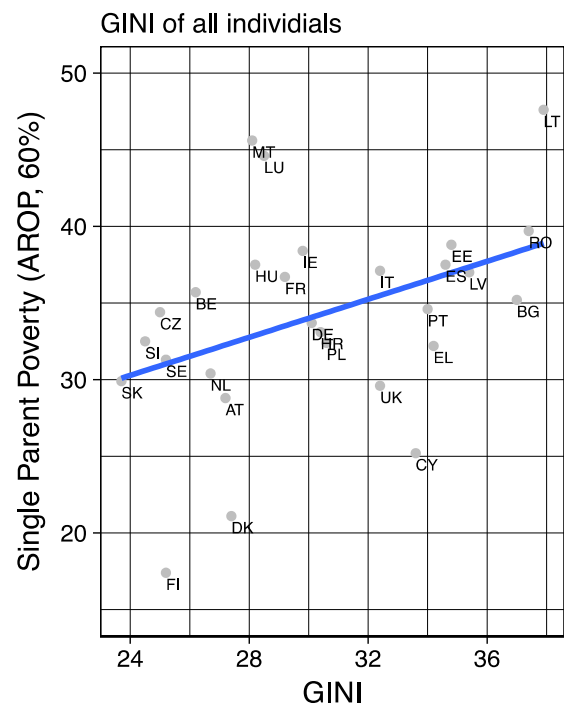
A. Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families At Risk of Poverty



B. Gender Equality



C. Economic Inequality



3 Determinants of single parents' poverty risk and well-being

3.1 Socio-Economic Resources

Household composition

The more limited well-being seen among single parents and their families is often explained, particularly in literature from the United States, by referring to the individual characteristics of single parents or to characteristics of single parents' households. The absence of a partner in the household limits the number of potential earners and potential caregivers in the household. This alone makes it more difficult to earn a wage that exceeds the poverty line, makes the household more vulnerable to fluctuations and temporary interruptions in employment, and to combine work and family responsibilities (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015a). Additionally, it makes single parenthood associated with less favourable economies of scale.

Demographics and level of education

A dominant strand of literature on the unfavourable outcomes associated with single parenthood refers to the concept of 'diverging destinies' to indicate that single parents, compared to parents in a couple, on average were younger when they became a parent and have a lower level of education (McLanahan, 2004; Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). The educational gradient in single parenthood (i.e. the pattern of lower educated mothers more likely to be a single mother compared to higher educated mothers) was confirmed in various European countries, including Denmark, Finland, Norway, Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. An important exception was found in the Southern European countries of Greece, Italy and Spain, where there virtually was no educational gradient in single parenthood (Härkönen, 2018; Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006).

The lower levels of educational resources, and the associated higher poverty risks, were not only found of great importance to explain the well-being of single parents themselves, but also to resonate in the well-being of their families. Children growing up in single-parent families were found to experience lower levels of well-being compared to children growing up with coupled families (Treanor, 2016; 2018). These differences in children's well-being across family types could fully be explained by the risk and duration of poverty and material deprivation among single parents. In the United Kingdom, the lower level of education among single mothers could be associated to their children's reduced emotional well-being and cognitive development (Harkness & Salgado, 2018). Children growing up with single parents were found to perform less well on school tests (at the age of 15 this disadvantage corresponded to about 4 months of schooling), which could be explained by their parent's level of education, occupation, and material possessions (De Lange & Dronkers, 2018; De Lange, Dronkers, & Wolbers, 2014).

Challenges to resource-based explanations

It has been established here that the resources of single parents are important in supporting their well-being and that of their families. Yet, there are two important reasons why mere reference to single parents' resources cannot fully explain their impaired well-being or negative trends therein. The first reason is that in some cases

the resources of single parents have actually improved. For instance, in several countries — including Norway, Denmark, 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) (Kitterød & Lynstad, 2014; Ottosen, Andersen, Dahl, Hansen, & Lausten, 2014; Peacey & Hunt, 2008; Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). In some sense, 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 just emerging, and mothers still carry most of the care responsibilities for their children after separation. Hence, at this stage, shared residence can be regarded as a highly relevant trend from which can be learned, and a resource from which many single parents (mostly mothers) and their children can benefit. In Sweden, shared residence has been on a marked rise in recent years, and children from separated parents who spend approximately equal amounts of time with both parents report economic and material conditions, social relationships with parents and peers, and health outcomes that are on par with that of children growing up in two-parent families (Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, & Bergström, 2018; Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, Hjern, & Bergström, 2017). These findings were corroborated, with respect to emotional, behavioural and psychological well-being, health, and relationships with parents, by a meta-analysis of 40 studies from various countries (Nielsen, 2014).

Secondly, the lower levels of education among single parents were found to be a partial explanation of their elevated poverty risks, although it could only explain 5% to 20% (depending on the country) of the poverty risks of single parents (Härkönen, 2018), which suggests that other factors than their level of education are at play. The next two sections will address factors related to the labour market and to social policy.

3.2 Employment conditions in policy context

Paid employment is a key contributor to, but not a sufficient condition for, single parents' well-being. An important reason for this is that even though employed single parents are less likely to be in poverty (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015a), employment conditions have become increasingly precarious (Kalleberg, 2009), and wages have become more unequal (Atkinson, 2015). Particularly for the lower educated, wages have stagnated (Autor, 2014). As single parenthood is more common among the lower educated, it becomes very clear here how single parents' resources and development on the labour market interact.

Flexible working schedules are often seen as a way to support parents in balancing work- and family responsibilities. However, a recent study showed that such schedule control was associated with working overtime for men and women, but that women did not receive any wage benefits associated with this overtime (Lott & Chung, 2016). At the same time, such overtime and non-standard working hours (Horemans, 2014) are particularly difficult to negotiate for single parents without the support of a second caregiver. On the other hand, part-time jobs — substantially more common among women than among men — were found to be lower paid and associated with less favourable employment conditions (Marx & Verbist, 2008). Much of this research focused on gendered inequality on the labour market rather than on single parent specifically. Nevertheless, as the majority of single parents are women, gendered disadvantages on

the labour market (including the gender and motherhood pay gaps, less opportunities for career advancement, etc.) and the expectation for mothers to work part-time further complicate earning an adequate wage (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008; Blau, 2016; Gornick, 2004; Halldén, Levanon, & Kricheli-Katz, 2016). This has, among other things, resulted in substantial numbers of single parents living in poverty despite being in employment, or even in full-time employment (Horemans & Marx, 2018; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015b). For instance, over 20% of single parents in full-time, full year employment were (still) in poverty in Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg and Estonia (Horemans & Marx, 2018). This was substantially more likely for working single parents in labourer occupations, compared to in skilled and professional occupations (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018a).

The above demonstrates the importance of policy solutions that support single parents to earn adequate wages, as employment can only adequately secure well-being when it is made possible, when it is feasible given the other demands single parents face, and when it is paying well (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001). This is particularly relevant given the increased importance that is given in European social policy making to employment as a means to achieve economic well-being, which is explicitly stimulated in the EU social investment package (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012; Vandenbroucke & Vleminckx, 2011) and characterized as a turn towards activation (Bonoli, 2013). For instance, even though activation policies in Germany, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom were able to increase the labour market participation of single mothers, these policies failed to bring down their poverty rates (Jaehrling, Kalina & Mesaros, 2015).

Impact of parental leave and childcare policies in supporting single parents' employment

Various policies have been found to support the employment of single parents. When analysing the benefits of such policies for single parents, it is important to consider a life-course perspective (Zagel & Hübgen, 2018) that acknowledges that policy outcomes early in life (for instance, when still in a couple) can affect outcomes later in life (for instance, after becoming a single parent). Indeed, having used parental leave as well as having used childcare (at some point in the life-course, when the children were young) were found to be positively associated with the likelihood that single parents were employed across European countries (Van Lancker, 2018), which has also been found to reduce their poverty risk (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015a). Yet, while the use of public childcare unequivocally was associated with the later-in-life employment of single parents, the outcomes of parental leave are more complicated. Having used parental leave was associated with a larger probability of single parents being employed in for instance Luxembourg, Italy, Slovenia, Romania, Austria and Belgium: all countries with moderate durations of parental leave. Yet, particularly in Slovakia, Finland, Hungary and Estonia, all countries with very long durations of parental leave, having been on parental leave was associated with a lower probability of being employed (Van Lancker, 2018)⁵. It is with parental leave that the gendered nature of single parenthood, and how it is shaped by social policy, is shown again. In most countries, the very large majority of parental leave is used by mothers – rather than fathers – emphasizing their

⁵ For more on the effect of overly long periods of leave, see Nieuwenhuis, Need, & Van der Kolk, 2017.

perceived role as caregiver and, in the case of very long periods of leave, increasing their distance from the labour market.

Fathers taking leave is considered a promising strategy to improve the gender balance in terms of both (paid) employment and care responsibilities (Karu & Tremblay, 2017). Although there seems to be very little evidence on how fathers' uptake of parental leave will affect single mothers specifically, a more gender-equal division of employment and care prior to separation, may resonate post-separation. Indeed, several countries, such as the Nordic countries, seem to have some success in stimulating and facilitating fathers to take sizeable portions of total leave (Eydal et al., 2015; Karu & Tremblay, 2017). In Sweden, the leave policy is formulated in gender-neutral terms, and by default both parents have equal entitlements to parental leave. Part — but not all — of this leave can be transferred to the other parent, which happens more often from father to mother than vice versa. This gender-neutral formulation of leave policy contributes to fathers taking sizeable shares of the total parental leave, and were recently shown to continue to do so (albeit at slightly lower rates) after they separate the mother of their child (Duvander & Korsell, 2018). Although the explicit link has not (yet) been studied, there are indications that the rapid rise of the shared residence in Sweden, with its desirable outcomes, is associated with the increased uptake of parental leave by Swedish fathers.

As followed from the discussion of precarious work and in-work poverty, facilitating employment as such is not (necessarily) enough. Working single parents were found less likely to be 'earnings poor' (that is: having insufficient earnings to rely on those to avoid poverty — even when controlled for working full-time, full year) in countries that did not rely on *informal* care for children, with fewer financial disincentive (e.g. in the form of generous benefits for the non-employed), and where populations (on average) express more gender equal norms in surveys (Horemans & Marx, 2018). Parental leave, but only if it is paid, as well as high rates of union bargaining coverage to encourage adequate employment conditions, were also found to support single parents to not only stay out of poverty, but also more likely to earn a middle-class wage (Byun, 2018).

Support for working single parents is important for outcomes beyond earnings (to avoid poverty). Work-family conflict, more common among single parent families (Esser & Olsen, 2018), was found to reduce the subjective well-being of working mothers (Matysiak, Mencarini, & Vignoli, 2016; Roeters, Mandemakers, & Voorpostel, 2016). Working single parents were found less likely than coupled parents to have jobs that matched their preferences regarding job security and work-life balance (Esser & Olsen, 2018). In terms of (perceived) job security, these gaps were particularly large in Norway, Ireland, Spain and Slovenia, and with respect to work-family balance these gaps were large in Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Hungary (ibid.).

In terms of policies, single parents were found to experience more job security in countries with longer unemployment benefit duration, a larger union density, with a stronger active labour market effort and with dual-earner/dual carer family policies. Longer unemployment duration and dual earner/dual carer policies were found to support single parents in having a job that matches their preferences regarding work-family balance.

Employment tends to be positively associated with health, and this also was found to be the case among single parents (Burström, Whitehead, Clayton, & Fritzell, 2010). Policies stimulating single parents' employment, such as active labour market policies

and childcare, were found to provide a double advantage in this respect, likely by reducing work-family conflicts and poverty (Nieuwenhuis, Tøge, & Palme, 2018). These policies were associated with more single parents in employment, thus experiencing the health benefit of employment. On top of that, the health benefit of employment was found to be larger in countries that had these policies in place, such as in the Nordic countries. Yet, it should also be noted that in countries with strong support for employment, those single parents who were not employed — for whichever reason — were in comparatively poor health. The health of the non-employed was instead positively associated with redistributive policies such as child benefits and generous social assistance levels for single parents (Esser, 2017; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b).

3.3 Redistributive policy

Even though European social policy can increasingly be characterised as stimulating, facilitating, and relying on employment, as was described above, for single parents, employment not always suffices to secure (economic) well-being. The need for redistributive social policies, often in the form of financial transfers, seems to remain well-motivated. Supporting the economic well-being of single parents also supports the well-being of their children. For instance, going back to the school performance of children growing up with a single parent, family policies equalizing the financial resources between single-parent and two-parent families — effectively by improving the economic well-being of the single-parent families — were also found to boost the academic performance of children growing up with a single parent (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden Thompson, 2003).

Income from transfer policies remains an important share of the income of many single-parent families. In many countries, transfer income makes up for a substantial part of the disposable incomes of single parents working full-time at half the average wage (Bradshaw, Keung, & Chzhen, 2018). In Ireland, Denmark, the Slovak Republic, Finland, Bulgaria, Sweden, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom, transfer incomes made up for over 40% of these single parents' incomes. In Romania, Italy, Belgium, Greece Norway, Croatia, Estonia, Portugal, Switzerland and Spain, this share was below 20%. Particularly important types of transfer income were housing benefits (in for instance Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Poland and France) and particularly family benefits (Bradshaw & Finch, 2002). In-work benefits played a smaller role, in for instance Ireland, Slovak Republic, Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Bradshaw et al., 2018). Yet, despite the importance of transfer income for the economic well-being of working single parents, in a majority of European countries the adequacy of disposable household incomes reduced during the years of the economic crisis, and particularly so in Lithuania, Poland, and Norway. Social assistance levels for single parents who were not working, were reduced markedly in Lithuania and Hungary. Although budgetary restraints are often cited as necessitating the reduction of social assistance levels, as second important reason was identified to be the falling of gross minimum wages (Cantillon, Collado, & Van Mechelen, 2018). To maintain work incentives, it is typically assumed that the net wages of those working for minimum wages have exceed social assistance levels. In times of falling wages on the labour market, welfare states have increasingly sought to maintain these work incentives by supplementing the incomes of

those working for low or minimum wages, at the expense of the adequacy of minimum income benefits for non-working single parents (and other families).

Redistributive policies and (policy context of) employment should not only be considered separately. Combining perspectives on inadequate wages (that is, wages that are insufficient for single parents to reach the poverty threshold) and welfare state redistribution, three patterns were identified (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018a). The Nordic countries showed '*balanced performance*' of securing low in-work poverty through low rates of inadequate wages and adequate redistribution. Instead, '*unbalanced performance*' was found in for instance Ireland and the United Kingdom: high rates of inadequate wages that are compensated by high levels of redistribution, to result in low rates of in-work poverty. Finally, '*limited performance*' of high rates of in-work poverty were found in for instance Luxembourg and the United States, due to high rates of inadequate wages that were not matched by sufficient levels of redistribution.

Targeting, generosity and non-take-up

How redistributive policies are designed, and the quality of governance with which they are administered, matters greatly. A long-standing debate in social policy is whether redistributive policies that are universal to everyone, or targeted specifically to the poor, tend to be more effective in reducing poverty. Originally, a paradox was observed in which countries that targeted their benefits *less* towards the poor were *more* effective in reducing poverty (Korpi & Palme, 1998). This paradox was resolved by showing how in countries with more universal benefits, partisan support for such benefits was higher (because more people benefitted from some form of benefits), and overall levels of redistribution were more generous. On the contrary, targeted benefits were less effective in reducing poverty because they tend to be less generous, associated with more stigma, and take-up (see below) was lower. Similar findings were reported pertaining to single parents specifically (Brady & Burroway, 2012). However, with respect to single parents, more recent studies report that as long as adequate levels of redistribution are ensured, supplemental measures targeting (poor) single parents result in the most effective poverty reduction (Morissens, 2018; Van Lancker, Ghysels, & Cantillon, 2015).

A common challenge with redistributive policies in general, and with targeted policies in particular, is that eligible households do not make use of the benefits ('non-take-up'). Lack of information, complexity of the application procedure, and the use of personal discretion by frontline managers (or 'street-level bureaucrats') are all determinants of non-take-up of social benefits (Evans, 2016; Kleven & Kopczuk, 2011; Lipsky, 2010; Van Oorschot, 1991). Studies of the (non-)take-up of benefits by single parents specifically, however, remain scarce. The existence of means-tests on the one hand increases non-take-up of benefits, while on the other hand limits particularly single parents to build up some level of savings or wealth (Sierminska, 2018). Precise data on non-take-up are lacking, particularly with respect to single parents, but there are strong indications that a non-negligible share of households does not benefit from the social policies they are eligible to. Scarce estimates suggest that take-up rates of social assistance and housing benefits in European countries vary between 40% and 80%, and for unemployment compensation between 60% and 80%, and that take-up rates are on the decline (Hernanz, Malherbet, & Pellizzari, 2004; Riphahn, 2001).

A recent review of literature indicated two venues for improving take-up in European members states (Eurofound, 2015). The first was to improve administrative procedures, including removing the need to apply for benefits through automation; simple, transparent and stable benefit criteria; and proactive administrative systems. The second was to provide the right information at the right time, for instance by not only informing people about entitlement criteria but also about where and how to apply and by providing active support during the application procedure; by improving the visibility of local implementations of benefits, that are easily overlooked in complex, fragmented benefit structures; and by raising awareness among local governments and organisations that eligible people may not be applying. The literature review provides two country-specific examples (Eurofound, 2015) of improving the take-up of benefits specifically for single parents. In Belgium, a cooperation is described between the tax office, the national office for sickness and disability insurance, and health insurance fund to proactively contact potential cases of non-take-up of increased reimbursements options of healthcare expenditure (including qualifying single parents). In France, a partnership between the family social security fund and its local offices and public employment offices pro-actively invite people to meetings to assess entitlements and explain application procedures — including for a single-parent allowance.

Private transfers

In addition to public (redistributive) transfers, private transfers are of particular relevance to single parents, particularly in the form of child support payments. These transfers between households were found to reduce single-parent poverty by up to 6 percentage points among working single parents in the Netherlands and Finland, and to more limited degrees in for instance the United Kingdom (4%-points), Germany (2%-points) and Ireland (1%-point) (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018a). Given these results, it is relevant to note that the United Kingdom guarantees an advance on child support, whereas Ireland does not (Beaumont & Mason, 2014). A guaranteed advance on child support payments (in case a former partner is unable, or refuses, to pay) seems to be important to provide income security and stability (OECD, 2011). Yet, with increasing complexity of family forms, legislation pertaining to child support payments is struggling to keep up (Meyer, Skinner, & Davidson, 2011). For instance, Iceland has a long tradition of providing a guaranteed advance on child support, embedded in a benefit system that was developed prior to 1962. This benefit system has not been updated to cater for modern family forms including for instance shared residence, and has been criticised for being based on outdated assumptions about care and work responsibilities, resulting among single parents in the disposable income of the residential parent to be substantially higher than that of the other parent, even if their child(ren) spend(s) equal amounts of time with both parents (Eydal, 2018).

4 Lessons from a mutual learning programme

The review of the literature so far focused mostly on systematic comparisons of different approaches taken by different European countries to support single parents. This is not to imply that there are no country-specific approaches, tailored to the local conditions. To review these is beyond the scope of this thematic paper, but a few examples and insights will be provided.

On 21 and 22 October 2015, the EU Mutual learnings programme in gender equality organised a meeting in Paris, focused on social policies aimed at assisting single parents.⁶ Several good practices were identified, a selection of which are repeated here. France combines universal and targeted policies for single parents. The universal policies include family allowances, childcare services, supports to low-income families, and an 'employment tax credit' and 'activity solidarity income' to stimulate employment through economic incentives. There is a supplementary childcare support for single parents, providing a one-off payment to single parents with children under 10, who are registered as job-seekers. A possible downside of the French system was identified to be its complexity. Local implementations of policies include a child support guarantee and support for improved information and advice, as well as family mediation implemented through local partnerships. A project in Paris, that was described as a 'good practice', combines practical assistance to reintegrate single parents in the labour market through a job-seekers network, combined with childcare services that are flexible to their needs.

In Germany, many single parents were dependent on unemployment benefits, and among those 60% were low educated. Like France, Germany emphasises the importance of labour market integration of single parents, for instance through a guaranteed childcare place for all children under 3, efforts by the federal employment agency to focus on the competence development of single parents, and organised information meetings with opportunities to network with employers. Officers for equal opportunities were located in 500 job centres.

Belgium has limited childcare options for very young children and limited financial support to single parents, despite additional benefits and a guaranteed payment for single parents missing out on child support payments. Interestingly, a trend was observed to foster shared residence (and custody) in divorce settlements instead of child support payments.

In the Czech Republic, poor living conditions were reported to be common. Low employment rates among single parents were related to the very long period of four years of parental leave (see above). It is interesting to observe that the Czech Republic (with average rates of single-parent poverty) and the Netherlands (with relatively low single-parent poverty rates), have few policies specifically tailored to single parents, and rely on general policy provisions instead. Single parents in Romania were shown above to have among the highest poverty rates in Europe, and were reported to face high levels of unemployment, in-work poverty, and employment insecurity. The family benefits in Romania are means-tested and conditional on children's school attendance.

5 Key findings and conclusions

The literature review above indicated how resources are very important for the well-being of single parents and their families, but that their resources being more limited than other family types can only provide a partial explanation for their reduced (socio-economic) well-being. Employment can be associated with beneficial outcomes, but was

⁶ A summary report, discussion papers, and comments papers can be found online: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/other-institutions/good-practices/review-seminars/seminars_2015/lone_parents_en.htm

shown not to be a sufficient condition for socio-economic well-being for single parents and only in the context of social policies that support employment. Redistributive policies remain uncontestedly important for single parents. Moreover, the interplay between single parents' resources, employment, and policies is important in understanding and designing solutions to support single parents. For instance, as single parents are more likely to be lower educated and face gendered wage penalties in the labour market, social policies seeking to promote (at the expense of redistributive transfers) economic independence through employment in increasingly precarious labour markets, may be found inadequate.

The gendered nature of single parenthood is often observed, but less integrally included in discussions about solutions to improve the well-being of single parents. Child support policies were found to be associated with poverty reductions, but also based on gendered — and possibly outdated — assumptions about care responsibilities before and after separation. Many countries show a rise in shared residence, with the child alternately living with both parents after separation, suggesting that in these countries the concept of a single parenthood with the sole responsibility for raising may become outdated. Support for involved fathers, such as the gender-neutral formulation of parental leaves in the Nordic countries, may be an underexplored policy solution for not only addressing the gendered nature of single parenthood, but also to improve their (economic) well-being. It is too early to make definitive recommendations in this regard, particularly in the absence of quality data and (causal) analyses thereof, and undeniably shared residence will not always be a desirable or effective strategy. Yet, the experiences discussed above with Swedish fathers taking parental leave (even) after separation and with positive well-being outcomes for children in shared residence, warrant further investigation.

Important findings were reported on which policy approaches support single parents. These include solutions tailored specifically to single parents, such as child support (and guaranteed advances) and financial supplements to child benefits that are targeted to single parents in poverty. Some of the country-specific solutions discussed above suggest that countries often combine universal and targeted policy measures, while both the Czech Republic and the Netherlands show low poverty rates among single parents in a policy context that is characterized by few regulations specifically targeted to single parents. It should not be overlooked that policies and institutions that support *all* families with children, such as paid parental leave and childcare, and *all* in the labour force, such as active labour market policies to support workers, more generous unemployment benefits of longer duration, adequate social assistance levels, and strong unions to help achieve adequate wages for more workers, were also found of particular importance. These findings are in line with the interpretation that was given to the Figure above (Cooke, 2017; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b): single parents tend to do well in countries with institutions to support gender equality and class equality.

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