



Mechanisms supporting single parents across the European Union



Introduction

This memo presents trends and risks for single parents across the European Union, and provides an overview of existing support mechanisms. We also highlight examples of practices supporting single parents in some Member States. The memo focuses on single-parent households as this type of families is among the most financially vulnerable groups in society.¹ In 2017, single parents with dependent children recorded the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion among all household types.²

Single parents in the European Union

Single parenthood typically results from separation, divorce or the death of a parent. Other factors include the absence of a parent for prolonged periods (e.g. due to migration), unintended pregnancy or the choice to raise a child alone.

Defining single-parent families, also referred to as lone-parent families, as a social category raises multiple difficulties, as family structures evolve over time. Definitions tend to vary from country to country and not all separated parents may fall into the single parent category depending on their partnership status and family structure. Moreover, many definitions for the status of single parents fail to recognise situations of ‘*de facto* single parenthood’, such as situations where a parent is severely ill or living abroad.³ In this memo, we use the OECD’s definition of a single parent as ‘a parent raising one or more children living in a household without a partner’.⁴

Comparing the share of single-parent households across European Member States proves challenging, due to countries often applying different concepts and definitions of the single family. In 2017, Latvia and Lithuania counted at least 25 per cent of children living with a single parent, while there were under 10 per cent in Greece, Croatia and Poland.⁵

Today, separation is the primary cause for single parenthood in most European countries. In the last decades, rising divorce and separation rates across Europe have led to an increase in the share of single-parent families, but also to shorter episodes of single parenthood with the increase in re-partnering, recomposed families and shared custody of children.⁶ This means that many children in single-parent families have two parents who live separately.⁷

Because single parenthood is not necessarily a permanent status, it makes single-parent families difficult to define as a social category. Additionally, single-parent families have different socio-economic backgrounds and household structures, and may receive disparate support from a potential second parent. Living arrangements for single-parent households are therefore complex and difficult to capture when collecting data, which is a challenge for

both researchers and policy makers. In a 2018 report for Population Europe, Bernardi and Mortelmans argue that as the group of single-parent families is diverse, it is difficult to design and implement targeted policies to support them.⁸

Single parents and their children are at high risk of poverty

Regardless of the diverse causes for single parenthood, single-parent families are among the most vulnerable household types, along with large families.⁹ In the EU, 47 per cent of single-parent households were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2017, compared with 21 per cent of two-parent households.¹⁰ The proportion of single-parent households at risk of poverty ranges from 36 per cent in Estonia, to 66 per cent in Ireland (see Figure 1).

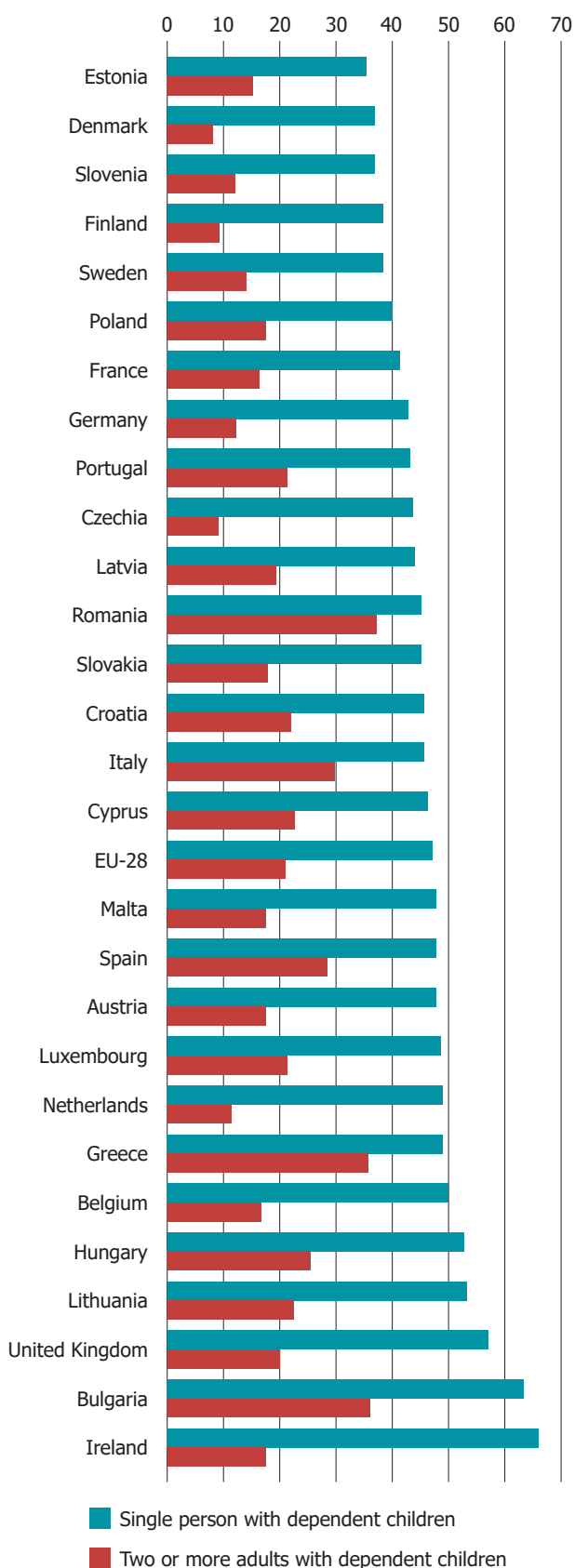
BOX 1: VULNERABLE GROUPS

In the context of vulnerable groups, vulnerability is a term that covers various dimensions and can be understood in multiple ways.¹¹ In this memo, the term vulnerability is used to refer to both financial vulnerability and social vulnerability. Both dimensions are included in the Eurostat indicator ‘at risk of poverty or social exclusion’ which corresponds to the sum of people who are either at risk of poverty, severely materially deprived or living in a household with very low work intensity.¹² Additionally, a further dimension of vulnerability may be social stigmatisation or discrimination faced by certain groups.¹³

There are several factors that contribute to vulnerability, with many single parents facing ‘combined vulnerabilities’ with difficult access to the labour market and to an adequate income, with multiple caring responsibilities, and, for some, without practical or emotional support from a partner. In this regard, single parents without access to affordable childcare may end up in precarious jobs, or leave the labour market altogether in order to care for their child(ren).¹⁴ In 2018, the average employment rate for single parents across the EU was 74 per cent, compared with 81.9 per cent for parents living in a couple (see Figure 2).

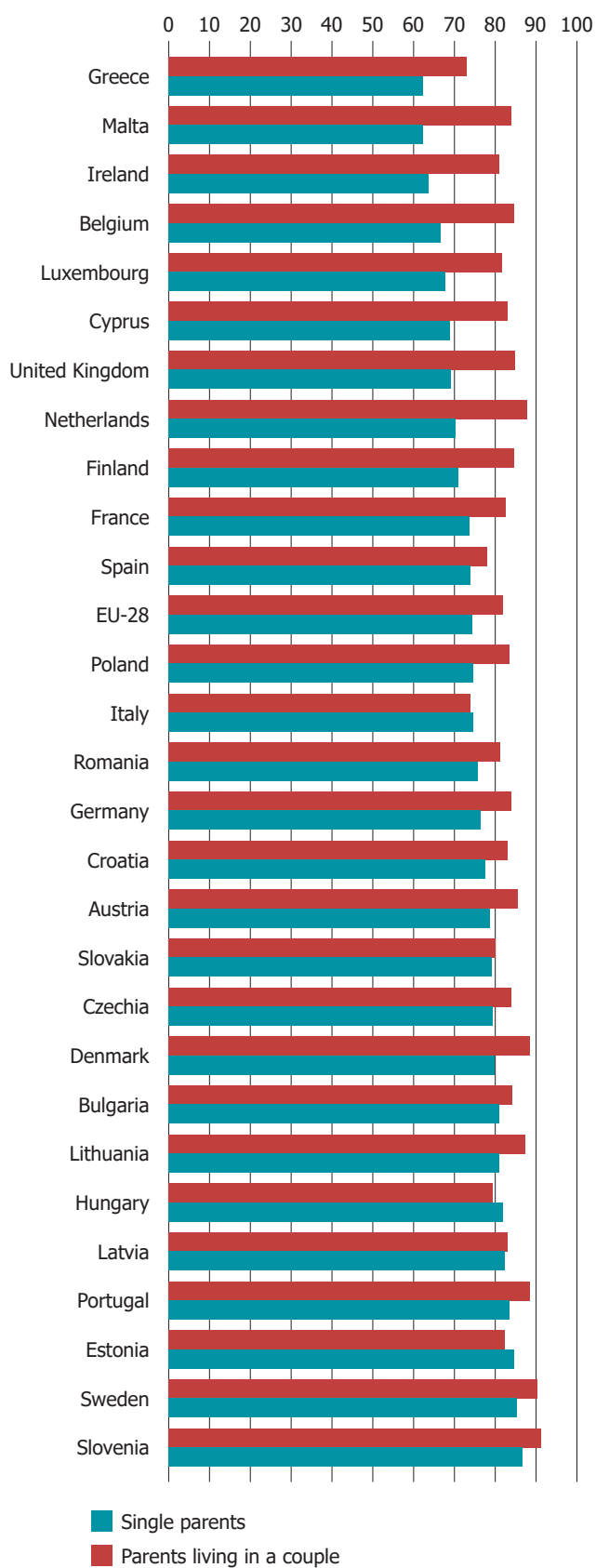
However, the total rates hide differences in employment between female and male single parents. In the EU, the average employment rate of male single parents is 84.2 per cent, compared with 72.1 per cent of female single parents in 2018. Although single-father families have become more common in recent years, single parents are, in most cases, still women (see Figure 3).¹⁵

FIGURE 1: PEOPLE WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY OR SOCIAL EXCLUSION BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, 2017



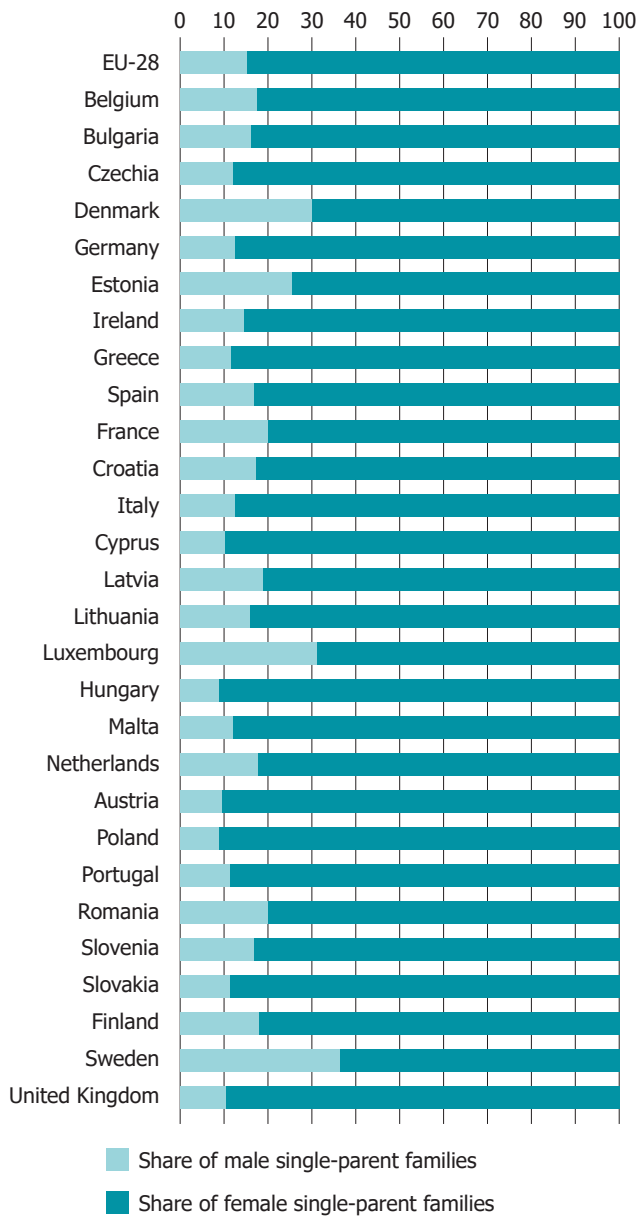
Source: Eurostat, indicator [ilc_peps03] extracted on 28/05/2019

FIGURE 2: EMPLOYMENT RATE OF PARENTS BY PARTNERSHIP STATUS ACROSS THE EU, 2018



Source: Eurostat, indicator [lfst_hheredy] extracted on 28/05/2019

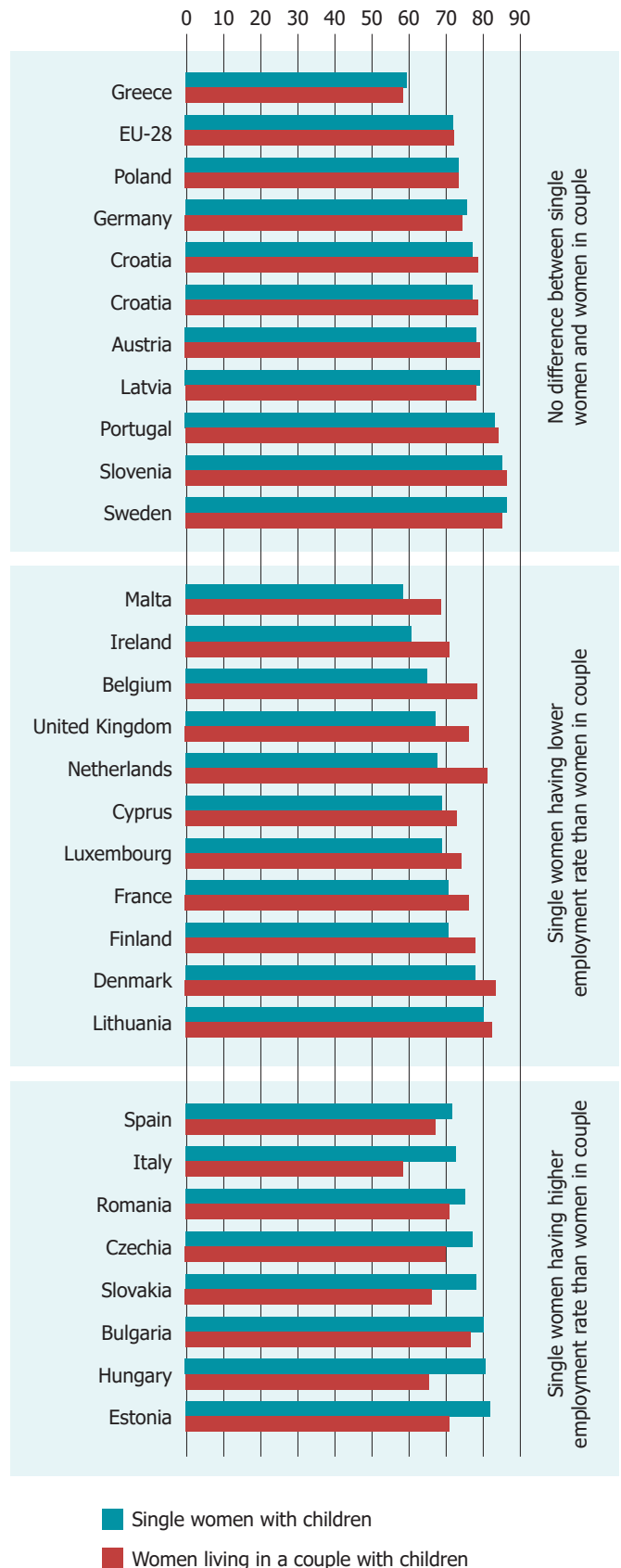
FIGURE 3: SHARE OF MALE AND FEMALE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES, 2018



Source: Eurostat, Indicator [lfst_hhaceday] extracted on 28/05/2019

Single mothers are particularly vulnerable in that they tend to earn less than men: the current gender pay gap in the EU suggests that women's gross hourly earnings were 16 per cent below those of men on average in 2017.¹⁶ Women are also more likely than men to leave the labour market when they become a parent, which puts them at a disadvantage when trying to re-enter the labour force after a few years of not being engaged in paid employment.¹⁷ Finally, they also tend to earn less than other women, due to the burden of raising children alone, which creates additional barriers to higher-wage employment.¹⁸ Other factors reinforce these barriers, such as the level of education, the age of parents, the lack of flexibility or reluctance from employers to hire them.¹⁹

FIGURE 4: FEMALE EMPLOYMENT RATE BY HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION, 2018



Source: Eurostat, Indicator [lfst_hheredy] extracted on 28/05/2019

What existing mechanisms are used to support single parents across the EU?

There are typically two types of policies aimed at countering poverty risks faced by single-parent families: 1) policies providing various forms of social assistance, and 2) policies facilitating access to the labour market.²⁰ In practice, mechanisms implemented by countries may include a combination of universal benefits for people and families in precarious situations, and targeted policies to support the specific needs of single-parent families.²¹

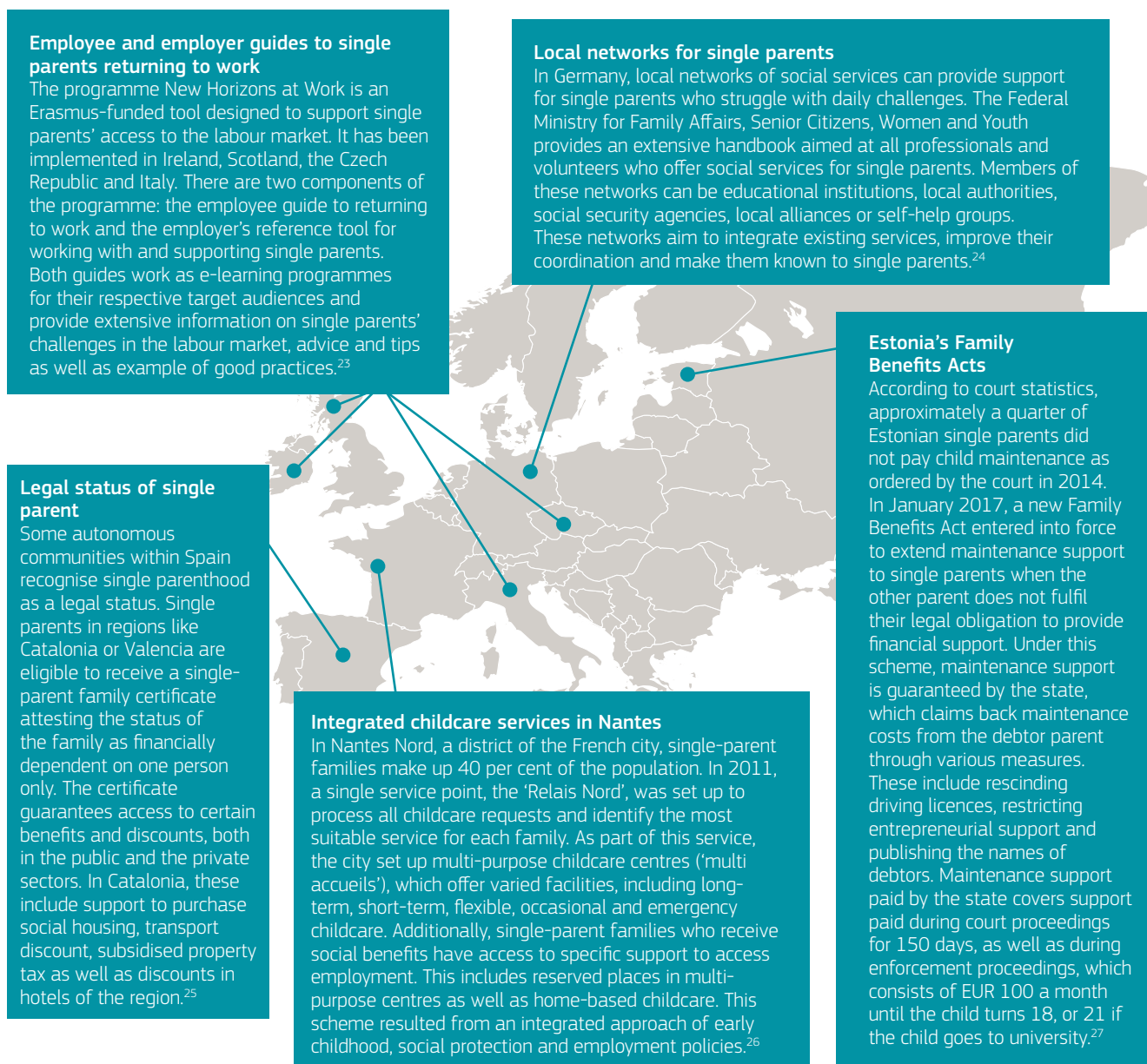
Social assistance

Some policies aim to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion of single-parent families through the provision of social assistance and monetary transfers.

Most EU Member States provide some form of financial support to single-parent families, yet this type of support is not always part of targeted policies. These different forms of support may include:²²

- 1. Specific benefits or assistance for single-parent households:** Some EU Member States provide a special benefit or tax credit for single parents, on top of other allowances. This is the case, for instance, in Austria and Ireland.
- 2. Higher rates of family allowance for single-parent households:** In some EU Member States, single parents may not have any special benefit, but instead receive higher amounts of family allowances than two-parent families, and sometimes of other related benefits. This is the case, for instance, in Italy and Portugal.

FIGURE 5: PRACTICES IN EU MEMBER STATES



3. Higher rates of general social assistance based on income: Single-parent families may be eligible for other forms of benefits based on income, rather than specific to their status as single-parent families. This is the case, for instance, in the United Kingdom.

Countries may implement a mix of these instruments. For instance, France provides both a special benefit and tax reductions for single parents.

Additionally, some countries might provide other forms of social assistance. In Spain, for instance, a new strategy to provide children with adequate housing gives priority to large families and single-parent families.²⁸

Member State governments may also play a role in ensuring that single parents receive financial support from the second parent, or instead they may offer such support in place of the other parent. In most countries, payment of child maintenance is a legal obligation and non-payment is usually sanctioned, ranging from enforced payment or salary deductions to imprisonment.²⁹ In some countries, such as Austria or Estonia, the government grants an advance on maintenance payment when the second parent's obligation is not fulfilled. Others, like Croatia or France, provide child maintenance through specific agencies. In certain countries, such as Finland, this maintenance payment is also paid when the father is unknown.³⁰

Enabling access to the labour market

Other policies are targeted to facilitate better access to the labour market for single parents.

Research suggests that a key enabler for parents' participation in the labour market is access to **affordable and flexible early childhood education and care (ECEC)**.³¹ For single-parent families, ECEC can be particularly helpful, as flexible opening hours may make it easier to combine work and care responsibilities for young children without external support.³² High childcare costs, combined with strict opening hours, may represent a greater hurdle for single parents than for other parents, who may have a partner with whom they can share caring duties.³³

While the EU aims to have at least 90 per cent of children aged from three to compulsory school age in ECEC across all Member States, and 33 per cent of children aged 0 - 3, this target has yet to be met.³⁴ There is considerable variation within the EU, and even within Member States, with regard to the provisions and support to access care services. Yet, some countries formally cater to the needs of single parents at national level. For example, Lithuania offers 50 per cent reduction in payments for ECEC.³⁵

Access to after school care and extra-curricular activities represent a similar support mechanism for single parents struggling to combine work and care responsibilities.³⁶

Some Member States also offer special leave provisions for single parents to help them combine parenthood and labour market participation. For example:

- Some countries provide a longer period of leave for single parents. For instance, Slovakia offers an extended period of maternity leave for single mothers.³⁷ In Greece, the period of parental leave is double for single parents.³⁸ Meanwhile, the Czech Republic offers longer periods of long-term care leave for children under the age of 10 to single-parent families.³⁹
- Some countries offer the possibility to transfer leave to another relative. In Bulgaria, for example, parental leave can be transferred to the father in case of illness or death of the mother – and, after the child has reached six months, maternity leave is transferrable to the mother's or father's parents if the father is unknown or deceased.⁴⁰

Organisations and governments may also put in place measures to encourage flexible working arrangements such as part-time working or flexible working hours, to enable parents to fit their working schedules around family and care commitments. For an overview of these measures, see the EPIC policy memo on Family-Friendly Workplaces.⁴¹

Endnotes

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