

Almost one in four people in the EU lives at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Lone parents are especially vulnerable compared to the general EU population. Almost half (48 %) of lone mothers and a third (32 %) of lone fathers are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Women in particular are affected as they make up almost 85 % of all one-parent families in the EU.

Lifting people out of poverty

The eradication of poverty and social exclusion is an integral part of the Europe 2020 Strategy. This commitment aims to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty by 2020. However, Member States face challenges in meeting this target. The number of people living in poverty has increased by an additional 4 million over the last 5 years.

Women in general are at a higher risk of poverty. Over the course of their lives they receive a lower income than men, are more likely to work in low-paid and insecure jobs or take career breaks due to caring responsibilities at home. As a result, they are exposed to a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion, especially when they are the sole earners.

EU policies such as the Social Investment Package, the Employment Package and the European Social Fund, acknowledge that lone parents are highly vulnerable to income poverty and material deprivation. However, there is no single EU instrument that tackles the problem in a comprehensive way.

What does it mean to be poor in the EU?

Poverty among women and men goes beyond a basic lack of resources for survival and extends to the deprivation of civil, social and cultural activities as well as opportunities for political engagement and social mobility. Within the Europe 2020 framework, the concept of 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) is connected with at least one of three conditions:

- being at risk of poverty;
- being severely materially deprived;
- living in households with very low work intensity.



Household structure affects the risk of poverty or social exclusion

Household composition has a direct impact on poverty. Two working adults living together, for instance, may pool their resources and better protect themselves and their children against poverty, particularly if one person loses work unexpectedly. Lone-parent families have only one income to rely on. Changes in the household — such as the breakdown of a relationship or a death in the family — can therefore play a role in driving individual members into poverty.

In general, having a child or children impacts the expenses a family has to face and, therefore, also its risk of poverty.

A lone parent is defined as a parent raising one or more dependent children, living without a partner in the same household. There are 9.2 million lone parents in the EU and just under half of them live in poverty.

What is it like to be a lone parent at risk of poverty?

Restricted work choices and in-work poverty

The difference in the employment rate between lone mothers and lone fathers is as wide as 9 percentage points (78 % for lone fathers and 69 % for lone mothers). Younger mothers and women with young children are the least-employed parent groups ⁽¹⁾. 13 % of lone mothers and 9 % of lone fathers are unemployed and 18 % of lone mothers and 13 % of lone fathers are neither employed nor looking for a job.

Lone mothers — being women and being sole earners — face a double challenge. Due to possible difficulties reconciling work and family life, they face added constraints to find good jobs. Women are more prone to entering more flexible, yet lower paid and less secure forms of work, such as involuntary part-time jobs and jobs with temporary contracts ⁽²⁾. This further exacerbates the challenges faced by lone mothers.

Unpaid domestic and care work and its stereotypical attribution to women also plays a significant

role in one-parent families: 32 % of lone fathers and 44 % of lone mothers who work part-time (less than 30 hours per week) do not work more due to unpaid domestic and caring responsibilities ⁽³⁾.

However, in comparison to lone mothers, lone fathers have fewer and older children, who are more likely to be in school or kindergarten.

Having a job is not always enough to guarantee the economic well-being of lone parents and keep them out of poverty. 33 % of them, both men and women, receive a personal income from work that remains below the national poverty line. At the same time, one-parent families headed by women are also twice as likely to be materially deprived than those headed by men (20 % versus 9 %). Parental poverty can also have a strong impact on the personal development and education of children in the household, which can continue to affect them throughout their lifetime.

Lack of financial security

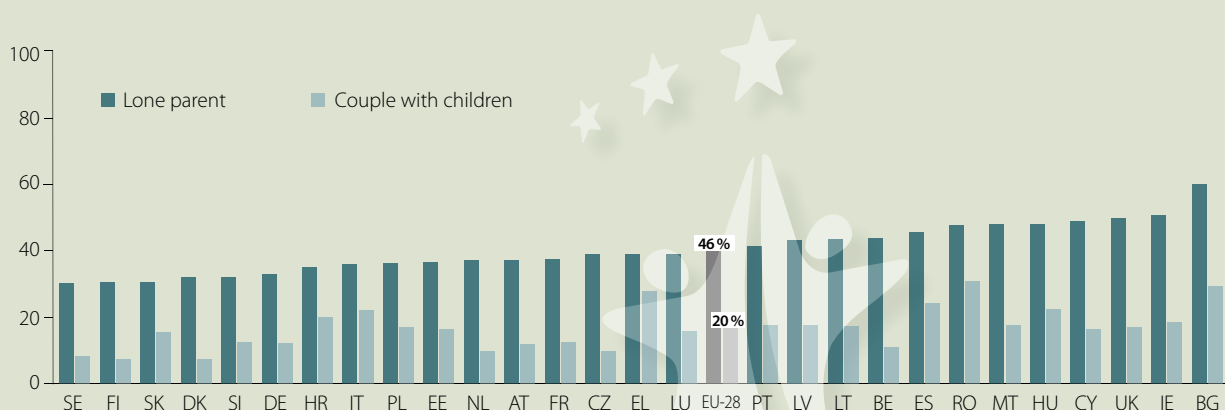
The majority of lone mothers (71 %) and 41 % of lone fathers find it challenging to face unexpected financial expenses (in comparison to 40 % of all women and 36 % of all men in the EU-28).

⁽¹⁾ Ruggeri, K. and Bird, C. (2014), *Single parents and employment in Europe: short statistical report No 3*, European Commission.

⁽²⁾ Ibid.

⁽³⁾ Maldonado, L. C. and Nieuwenhuis, R. (2015), 'Family policies and single parent poverty in 18 OECD countries, 1978-2008', *Community, Work and Family*, Vol. 18, No 4, pp. 395-415.

Figure 1 – Lone parents and couples with children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) (2014)



Source: EU-SILC, calculations based on 2014 microdata.

Note: The risk of poverty or social exclusion among lone parents is very different across the EU-28, varying from 35 % in Slovakia, Finland and Sweden to 58 % in Ireland and the United Kingdom, and 69 % in Bulgaria.

What lone mothers as well as lone fathers tend to lack are financial security and savings for larger or unexpected expenses, rather than specific items such as a phone or a television. 26 % of lone mothers and 16 % of lone fathers have experienced difficulties in paying utility bills.

Lone parents are more often lacking resources to spend on themselves, particularly lone mothers. Only 55 % of lone mothers say that they can spend a small amount of money each week on themselves (compared to 78 % of lone fathers).

What can be done to reduce the risk of poverty of lone parents?

Increase economic independence of lone parents

Increasing lone parents' economic independence, with particular attention to single mothers, is key to raising them out of poverty. Even when lone mothers are employed, it is not always enough to keep their household out of poverty. The inequalities women experience in the labour market — lower pay and insecure, part-time, or temporary jobs — have a detrimental effect on their income. This all leads to an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion for themselves and their children.

Round-the-clock childcare that suits flexible workers

is one of the good practices for work-life balance identified by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). This practice from Denmark shows how to provide childcare outside standard working times, so that parents can work flexible hours. It has made it possible for lone mothers and fathers to have a job, a career and children without having to rely on their families to care for their children. For more information on good practices, consult EIGE's website.

Establish work-life balance

Work-life balance measures also play a prominent role in supporting the full participation of lone parents in society. Positive measures should combine different policies, including the investment in public services and infrastructure that would secure the provision of accessible and affordable high-quality care, health services and transportation and the entitlement to paid care leave with effective job guarantees. Good practices collected by EIGE on supporting reconciliation of work, family and private life identify proven measures that Member States can adapt to their own context.

Round-the-clock childcare that suits flexible workers is one of the key conditions for work-life balance.



Adjust social protection systems in line with the current challenges

Social protection systems and anti-poverty policies need to tackle new challenges facing society, such as changing family structures and different forms and conditions of employment. The social protection systems and anti-poverty policies have to guarantee sufficient economic protection, not just for traditional forms of paid work over the life-course, but in particular, for those carrying out unpaid caring work or non-standard employment, or those affected by career interruptions caused by care responsibilities. It is important to ensure that in the labour market no burden is added to those who have care responsibilities.

Foster synergies within and across different policy areas

Stronger synergies are needed between anti-poverty strategies and other economic and social policies such as gender equality, employment, taxation, family and housing policies. Anti-poverty policies should complement policies targeting specific circumstances and groups, such as lone parents.

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Most recent reports include:

- Gender equality in power and decision-making (2016);
- Gender gap in pensions in the EU (2015);
- Gender equality and economic independence: part-time work and self-employment (2014).

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <http://eige.europa.eu/monitoring-the-bpfa>



Where to find more information from EIGE




- **Gender Mainstreaming Platform** provides guidance and tools for policymakers looking to mainstream a gender perspective into anti-poverty policies. There is a specific section dedicated to 'poverty'.
- **Gender Statistics Database** has the latest figures on gender and poverty in the EU. Data is comparable across Member States.
- **Resource and Documentation Centre** provides links to publications on lone parents and poverty. They are easily found using the keyword search function.

This fact sheet is based on the report prepared at the request of the Slovak Presidency of the EU (2016), in the context of the Beijing Platform for Action and Europe 2020. It explores progress between 2007 and 2014 in the alleviation of poverty of women compared to men as well as of specific at-risk groups, such as lone parents, persons with disabilities, migrants and Roma people. The full report will be available in November 2016.

European Institute for Gender Equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.

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