

THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY FROM A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *The topic of single parenthood is a sensitive one, and one that has been increasingly debated lately. From two-parent families who choose to go their separate ways, families in which there is a death, families in which one parent goes abroad to work and does not return and the children stay with either the other parent or with grandparents or other relatives, to children who are born due to a lack of protection for teenagers and one of the future parents does not take responsibility for raising a child, to girls who are raped and become pregnant and choose to give birth to their child, or minors who become pregnant and eventually stay with the children.*

In modern society, the disintegration of the extended family takes place at a time when land is declining in economic value and the most important asset becomes money, with the development of a highly technological industry. The shrinking of the family size has caused important changes in the lifestyle of the family group as the family has lost its economic, political and religious relevance. The control of the elderly over the young is becoming less oppressive and marriage no longer concerns the interests of the family as a whole, but asserts the independence of the individual to choose his or her marital partner and the time of marriage [Iluț, P., 2009, p. 15].

Keywords: single parent family; difficulties specific; single mothers; single fathers;

Introduction

The term single-parent family has become generally accepted for a particular type of family structure, one in which only one parent lives with, and has primary responsibility for the care of, dependent children. [Preda, Marian Social groups ignored/excluded by social policies in Romania, in Zamfir Cătălin, Social Policies in Romania, 2002, p 398].

"The single-parent family is the asymmetrical family structure formed by a parent and his or her child(ren)" [Mitrofan, I., Ciuperca, C., Psychology of Couple Life. Between illusion and reality, 2002, p 92]

"The single-parent family represents an alternative model of family life that appears as an integrated part of a general/global process of societal change" [Gherghel, Ana,

Single-parent families: between marginalization, social exclusion and the alternative family model, Romanian Journal of Sociology, no. 5-6, 1999, p. 484].

From a sociological point of view, the family can be defined as a social group built on relationships of marriage, consanguinity and kinship, with members sharing common feelings, aspirations and values. The family has proved to be one of the oldest and most stable forms of human community, ensuring the perpetuation of the species, evolution and continuity of social life.

From a legal point of view, the family is a group of people between whom a set of rights and obligations have been established, regulated by legal rules. These rules determine how a marriage is concluded, paternity is established, the rights and obligations of the spouses, the relationship

between parents and children, how inheritance is transmitted, etc. From this perspective, the family is a formal group, regulated by laws and regulations.

The term single-parent family defines the family unit by parental relationship, and is probably more appropriate compared to terms such as "broken, incomplete, asymmetrical family, etc." Used in the literature as it does not contain a negative connotation." [<http://www.creeaza.com/familie/asistentasociala/FAMILIAMONOPARENTALA-DELIMITA494.php> accessed 07.02.2022]

Parental responsibility is not a biological given, but is built on traditional patterns, through formal and informal general education and through specific activities determined by the era in which we live.

In the past, the issue of a family upbringing style was not addressed, and the principles of raising children were based on religious rules and morality, with all children being raised in a similar way. Parents made the rules known to their children and applied them strictly, without compromise.

Nowadays, the modern family no longer has a monopoly on the education of the younger generation and most parents turn to specialised institutions for support from the earliest ages of their children. There has also been a remarkable increase in investment in preparing children for life [Maisin, A., 2002, p. 14].

In a highly competitive society, parents go to great lengths to support their child's school work through all kinds of programmes and training. In the modern family, there is a blurring of differences between the two parents. Whereas in traditional society the family was seen as a relational unit, marked by the authority of the father, today there is a need to value the family in which the mother works and asserts herself professionally and humanly.

In the care, upbringing and education of children, both parents play equally important

roles, although the number of children in the modern family has greatly decreased. Relationships between children and their parents are educational relationships with positive or negative effects, which all parents should be aware of. Parents' attitudes, behaviour and words influence their children's behaviour and way of being. [Maisin, A., 2002, p. 22].

Difficulties specific to the single parent family

Living in a family where one of the parents is missing means facing major problems related to the family's interaction with the outside environment, as well as the relationships between family members, the interaction within the family as a social subsystem.

The single parent's responsibilities increase within the family, and the state often takes on too little of this extra demand.

Widowed, divorced or never married, female or male, the single parent needs outside help to solve problems that are normally solved by two people (husband or wife).

The frequent changes that have shaken society in recent times have also left their mark on the family, which is tending more and more towards single parenthood. The views on this type of family are often contradictory.

In traditional society, which was based on the extended family type, the single-parent family was not accepted and encouraged stigmatisation and labelling of those who chose this lifestyle. Due to fluctuating changes in modern society, relationship patterns and family roles are being redefined. Thus, in the modern nuclear family the lifestyle changes to the extent that it becomes independent, separate from the extended family with great possibilities for self-development and self-control, but also with great difficulties in the single-parent family.

Elena Zamfir (2006) considers that in Romania:

- all single-parent families with three or more children have low incomes, below subsistence level;
- above the decent minimum living standard are only very few single-parent families with one or two children in care;
- the child allowance is practically insignificant;
- many street children come from single-parent families;
- the number of children in institutions comes mostly from single-parent families.

In addition to economic and social problems, there are also psychological and behavioural problems, as well as the lack of normal interaction with family members, which accentuate the risk of marginalisation [E. Zamfir, 2006, p. 158].

Other studies have concluded that boys from single-parent families have a higher rate of deviant behaviour than girls from the same type of family. However, there are also a number of issues on which most researchers agree, in relation to single-parent families. For example, it is considered that the psychological costs are higher for men, while the material costs are higher for women.

It is also argued that single-parent families face greater economic and social difficulties than complete families and in particular in resizing the functions they have to fulfil.

The parent left with a child can no longer perform the family functions at an optimal level. For example, the sexual and reproductive functions are minimised, the economic function requires a great deal of effort on the part of the parent, and the function of socialising and integrating future adults into society is poorly performed.

The resizing of functions within the single-parent family must be seen in relative terms, as this process also occurs in classic families, only the underlying reasons differ.

As such, it cannot be said with certainty that the single-parent family is not suitable for the child's further development, since the classic family faces similar problems [G. Irimescu, 2004, p. 80].

Aspects of how children in single-parent families are affected

In modern society, the breakdown of the community has allowed the vision and perception of this type of household to change. The traditional family is no longer so important for the development of a child's optimal personality, under certain conditions, it shows in a study dedicated to single-parent families [https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-finante_banci-22396062-iana-familia-monoparentala-rata-saraciei.htm; 03.03.2021]

A single-parent family is better for a child than one in which there are arguments and problems. Whereas in the past families with unsuccessful marriages had to stay together for the sake of the children, nowadays it is considered better for the children if the parents separate, rather than subjecting them to constant family conflict.

Single-parent families are often victims of poverty and children tend to repeat their parents' experience. The same studies show that lone parenthood resulting from divorce is associated with reduced child-rearing: the mother is emotionally, materially and relationally overburdened and less available to the child just when the child needs more attention and effort. The most severely affected by divorce are young children, who become more disobedient, aggressive and less affectionate. Studies show that they are marked by sadness, feelings of frustration, confusion and anxiety, with many seeking contact with the absent parent. Older children are often angry with the parent they blame. Even in adolescence the experience of divorce is not borne smoothly, with feelings of sadness, anger, anxiety about the future [https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-finante_

banci-22396062-ioana-familia-monoparentala-rata-saraciei.htm; 03.03.2021].

On the other hand, the substantial increase in young unmarried mothers should be noted. Their situation is not at all negligible, especially as they often give birth at a young age (teenagers).

Because of the child, in most cases they are unable to complete their education and acquire a qualification to get a job. They usually remain dependent on social benefits even when their children grow up and could at least work part-time.

The case of single mothers

In the case of single mothers, it is estimated that the first problem to arise will be the experience of financial difficulties. The child becomes an economic support for many of them. Teenage girls who fail to complete their studies and therefore cannot get a job usually remain dependent on social benefits, even when their children grow up and they could at least work part-time. What is certain is that the economic situation of single mothers is getting worse and worse and that what is known as the 'feminisation of poverty' is no longer just a theme in books but a reality.

Unlike single fathers who, according to the statistics, look after older children, single mothers find themselves unable to work when their children are very young and help from relatives is almost non-existent.

The interest of female heads of households in finding a job is very high, commensurate with their need for additional income. Unfortunately, many of them do not have the necessary qualifications to find a job, are unable to work due to the young age of their children, or prefer not to work in order not to lose their state welfare benefits. At this point, the social policies of individual countries are very important and can encourage or discourage lone parents to look for a job. Often the mother begins to increase communication on various aspects of life

with the child, who increasingly takes on the role of confidant [Rădulescu, Sorin M., 1998, p.27]

In many situations the mother tends to support the child, considering him/her as emotional support, so that the child is involved in interactive structures that require a certain degree of maturity for which he/she is sufficiently prepared. If, gradually, the mother tends to confess to the child the role of absent parent, the conflicts that arise between them tend to mimic the old material conflicts [Mitrofan Ioană, Vasile Diana, 2015, p 11]. The child is pressured to take on this role and can be punished for "behaving" like the ex-spouse. Since children cannot express their tension-conflictual experiences and feelings, over time various "marked" forms of reaction may appear, such as somatization or neurotic behaviour. Some researchers draw attention to particular mother-daughter problems in this situation.

Primarily, feelings of jealousy and competition are involved here, in psychological areas such as 'dating' and subsequent academic achievement.

The problems of single fathers

As a rule, fathers have more financial freedom than single mothers, due to their generally higher level of education, which allows them to be more economically secure and more flexible in their use of financial resources.

The father as the only parent is aware that he has to be both father and mother to the child, which leads to new responsibilities such as housework and household chores. Some lack such experiences and tend to share this kind of task with their children. Girls are more helpful in these situations.

The father has difficulties - he complains especially that they can no longer synchronise the multiple duties of raising and educating the children, housework - housekeeping and work duties (source of livelihood). Most difficulties arise when

children are very young, requiring special care arrangements.

According to some research, children from all-father families have some specific traits:

- the father demands more independence from the child;
- he becomes more protective and caring (weakening in terms of authority), giving more importance to educational rather than disciplinary issues;
- the use of various forms of extra-familial support (grandparents, relatives) is more frequent;

Fathers are particularly concerned about their daughters' development as "masters and mothers" of the home. Research notes a certain anxious concern for girls' proper socialisation and sexual development. These fathers are hesitant to discuss sexual issues and express concern about the appropriateness of their daughters' social role modeling.

In fathers, something else occurs: due to their increased emotional involvement with their children, there is a decline in their experience of social activities. They avoid social activities involving married couples, and activities in which they might encounter especially divorced or widowed fathers are few. Their participation in events is lower, but their involvement in political activities, studies or further training increases.

In the works of several authors, a number of the child's relational needs are mentioned, such as the need for love is fulfilled by warm and affectionate relationships that are formed immediately after birth. Through these relationships initially with the mother and gradually with a wider and wider circle of people, the child develops its identity and becomes self-aware [Spillane - Grieco, E. 2000, p. 28].

Single women and men face a number of problems resulting from the combination of professional and parental roles. Finding functional solutions and maintaining the psycho-affective-personal balance of the

family are directly proportional to the level of education.

The relationships of the single parent with relatives and friends are very important. Social support is often seen as having a positive influence on the single parent's stress and family atmosphere.

Direct help from family and friends gives the single parent the impression that he or she can discharge his or her duties as head of the family honourably. Research has shown that the lack of this social support correlates positively with single mothers' use of punishment and restrictions on their children. On the other hand, the single parent may be overburdened by the need for emotional support from children.

Burdened by poverty and hardship, forced to leave part of their family problems to their children, emotionally overburdened by their children but often deprived of intimacy and sexual activity, blamed by a society guided by social norms into which they no longer fit perfectly, abandoned by some of their friends and blamed by their own relatives for the situations they find themselves in, single parents in many cases experience real dramas whose results are often mental illness or depression.

They are in many cases defeated by all these problems, and their "defeat" also has a negative impact on the children whom they are not infrequently obliged to place in institutions or give up for adoption [M. Preda, 1999, p. 320-323].

People with higher education do better at coping with the demands. As a general trend, single parents allow more independence to their children [Ştefan, C., 2006, p. 47].

In Romania, 85% of mothers raise their children alone [Ştefan, C., 2006, p.39].

Single-parent families headed by fathers constitute a minority within this type of family. In the last 20 years, however, it has become much more common. Current research confirms the numerical inferiority of single-parent fathers: in 2012 in Romania,

only about 15% of single-parent families were headed by fathers.

However, the number of single fathers is still quite low compared to single mothers because:

- in the event of divorce, custody of children is awarded mainly to mothers, except in cases where the mother refuses or proves incapable of caring for the children;
- in the case of teenage parenthood, most of the time young fathers run away from assuming paternal responsibilities, not legally recognizing their children and refusing them any moral or material support [I. Mitrofan, 1998, p. 64-65].

The main characteristics of a single-parent family in which the father is the only parent are the following:

- single parents have more financial freedom on the economic side, due to their higher level of education, which allows them to be more economically secure and more flexible in the use of financial resources;
- sons rather than girls enter into their structure, often preferring to live with their father;
- increased parenting is a difficulty for single fathers. They are generally not involved in domestic tasks beyond taking on the basic role, with many of the tasks being carried out with help from outside;
- lifestyle changes - due to their emotional involvement with children, leading to a 'decline' in social activity.

In conclusion, it can be said that single fathers can be successful in parenting. They confirm their ability to do so. For this reason, the pattern of single fathers compared to single mothers is less destructive to lifestyle.

Single parent families are often victims of poverty and are more likely to be subject to risk factors such as: increased tendency to abandon children, abuse and neglect. In the absence of material well-being, single-parent families are at increased risk of social

marginalisation, which leads to the child's maladjustment in the classroom or in the group of friends, as well as the emergence of inappropriate, difficult behaviour (running away from home, truancy, alcohol and tobacco consumption, theft, etc.).

In organised families, the lack of well-being is relatively mitigated by the presence of both parents in the child's life, who have more emotional resources and time to be involved in the child's upbringing and direct supervision.

Single parents are highly vulnerable because there is only one member of the family with a stable income and because there is usually a lack of support from the extended family.

While in organised families there are usually two people earning a stable income, in single-parent families, the lone parent with the children works overtime to meet the family's financial needs.

It should be noted that family income affects the parent-child relationship, i.e. the quality and quantity of free time that the parent should spend with the child. In this respect, some parents are aware that they have a more strained relationship with their children.

There are differences between the time spent together by the child and the parent in the lone parent family and the organised family, both in terms of quantity and quality.

When we talk about child-parent interaction, we refer both to the number of hours they spend together and to the quality of that relationship reflected in the activities carried out.

While in an organised family the parents complement each other and manage to make time to communicate effectively with the child, in a single-parent family the time spent together by parent and child is reduced because the single parent is emotionally, materially and emotionally overburdened.

There are differences between child-parent interaction in a single-parent family and child-parent interaction in an

organised family.

In the single-parent family, the child-parent relationship is characterized by protection, with a concern for the child, while in the organized family the interest in the child is obviously greater.

It is also noted that in most cases the mother is the only parent left to take care of the child's upbringing and education.

Local efforts to monitor and support single-parent families at high risk of social marginalisation, as well as those requiring specialist support for socio-educational supervision and recovery, must provide families with strong community support to uphold the child's right and interest in being raised by his or her parents.

To support the family group is necessary:

- involving decision-makers in providing special measures to protect the family, with the primary aim of integrating vulnerable families into society;
- development of educational and counselling programmes applied to the beneficiaries; o identification and exploitation of potential resources in the extended family (maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles) and their involvement in counselling, in order to prevent or limit social marginalisation and for socio-family-vocational integration.

Community-based psycho-socio-family integration aims to improve the quality of life by developing services that should be accessible to all, providing equal opportunities by promoting the rights of vulnerable people.

Conclusions

Single parent families are often victims of poverty and are more likely to be at risk of risk factors such as abuse and neglect.

Single-parent families are more vulnerable because there is usually only one member with a stable income and there is usually a lack of support from the extended family. It should be noted that family income affects the parent-child relationship, i.e. the quality and quantity of free time that the parent should spend with the child, and in this sense, there are parents who are aware that they have a more strained relationship with their children.

While in organised families there are usually two people earning a stable income, in single-parent families, the single parent with the children works overtime to meet the family's financial needs.

In the absence of material well-being, single-parent families are at increased risk of social marginalisation, which leads to the child's maladjustment in the peer group or circle of friends, as well as the emergence of inappropriate, difficult behaviour (running away from home, truancy, alcohol and tobacco consumption, theft).

In organised families, the lack of well-being is relatively mitigated by the presence and action of both parents in the child's life, as they have more material, emotional and time resources to be involved in the child's education, upbringing and direct supervision. In the conditions of our country, even the existence of a stable income in the family is no guarantee of overcoming poverty and it is a difficult problem for parents to provide for their children what they want and cannot have.

The quality of life in an organised family is relatively better than in a single-parent family, the single-parent family issue being very acute in Romanian society.

The recovery of the economy and thus the reduction of unemployment is the basic condition that could ensure the sustainable development of the family as a whole.

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