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Support to single parents in Croatia: an absent agenda

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1. Socio-economic and policy context

1.1. Socio-economic situation of single parents

In comparison to other EU countries, processes related to family pluralisation in Croatia are of somewhat smaller intensity (see e.g. Dobrotić, 2012). In line with that, Croatia can be placed among the EU Member States which are characterised by a small share of children living with a single parent – there is 9.3 % of children aged less than 18 living with a single parent in Croatia, which is below the EU-28 average (16.3 %) (Eurostat, 2015). Still, if we look into the structure of families with children in Croatia, there are 20.1 % of single mothers with children and 3.8 % of single fathers with children.¹ Mothers represent 84 % of all single parent families in Croatia (CBS, 2011).

There are several socio-economic risks Croatian single parent families are faced with. The most important one is lack of financial resources. Namely, the single parent families are at a relatively high risk of falling into poverty. If we compare the poverty indicators of households with dependent children, it can be noticed that single parent families face the highest poverty and material deprivation rates. While at-risk-of-poverty rate of households with dependent children was 18.9 % in 2013, at-risk-of-poverty rate of single parent families was 31.7 %² (e.g. at-risk-of-poverty rate of two adults with one dependent child was 15.7 %; two adults with two dependent children 17.4 %; two or more adults with dependent children 18.4 %; two adults with three or more dependent children 30.1 %) (CBS, 2014). Additionally, single parent families are faced with higher levels of in-work at-risk-of-poverty rates, as in 2013 this rate reached 13.9 % in the case of single parent families, compared to 7.8 % for all families with dependent children (Eurostat, 2015).

Different studies (e.g. Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović, 2003; UNDP, 2006; Pećnik, 2015) have additionally pointed at the unfavourable socio-economic situation of single parent families in Croatia, notably at their exposure to social exclusion and material deprivation. Namely, in comparison to two-parent families, the single parent families are less able to assure a minimum standard of living necessary for well-being and optimal development of children, as they have difficulties in finding suitable housing and providing basic necessities (e.g. meat/fish every day, heating at home, new clothes and furniture, PC etc.) and no resources to pay for their children's leisure-time activities and/or holidays (Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović, 2003; UNDP, 2006).³ The fact that they are mainly not able to count

¹ It must be noted that all single parent families are included here, i.e. also single parent families with children above 25 years of age. If we look into the data on single parent families which have children in education, there is 13.7 % of mothers with children and 2.6 % of fathers with children in the structure of all families with children in education (CBS, 2011).

² At-risk-of-poverty rate of single parent families reached 41.8 % in 2011 and 37.8 % in 2012 (Eurostat 2015).

³ Here it is important to notice that single-father households are better off than single-mother households. Namely, the median of the equivalent income of single-father households was 40 % higher than the median of

on financial support of the other parent makes this situation more difficult. There is no reliable data to assess the number of parents receiving child support from the other parent. On one hand the UNDP (2006) study shows that solely 8 % of single parents receive child support from the other parent, while on the other hand the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth statistics shows that 30.7 % of single parents receive child support. Only 19.4 % of single parent families who do not receive child support submit an appeal to the court (Tportal, 2014).

Recent research (Pećnik, 2015) showed that unemployment and housing (especially the fact that single parent families often live in rented apartments) are among the most pronounced problems the single parent families in Croatia are faced with, as well as the fact that they are not sufficiently protected on the labour market where their specific care needs are not enough recognised. There is lack of data to properly assess the position of single parent families on the labour market. Still, available Labour Force Survey data indicates that in comparison to two-parent families, single-parent families are less present on the labour market. E.g. in 2014 the employment rate of single adults with children in Croatia was 68.4 % and for adults living in a couple with children it was 77.6 % (Eurostat, 2015). There are some indications that single parent families are exposed to discrimination on the labour market, although it must be noted that this is a general practice in case of women and parents in Croatia, and not a problem exclusively reserved for single parents. Namely, on the one hand, according to the yearly report of Ombudsperson for Women, the number of official complaints for discrimination on the labour market based on the family status is low, only 2 % in 2014 (Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, 2015.). However, there are studies that show that single parent families are facing difficulties in finding a job and with regards to promotions, as well as facing a lack of understanding for their specific situation when it comes to care responsibilities (e.g. Raboteg-Šarić, Pećnik and Josipović, 2003; Pećnik, 2015).

Single parent families are also confronted with a lack of (in)formal social support, which makes it particularly difficult to balance between family, work and private activities, and they are also not satisfied with the quality of formal support available (Pećnik i Raboteg-Šarić, 2005; Pećnik, 2015). Single parents are exposed to persistent prejudices, where the public attitudes are more prone to widowed parents than to divorced parents or parents who had children out of wedlock (Raboteg-Šarić i Pećnik, 2010). Finally, single parent families report higher rates of social exclusion than two-parent families, and these are usually the families characterised by a lower level of education and employment, and less frequent contacts with family and friends (UNDP, 2006).

1.2. Policies aimed at support to single parents

In Croatia there is no explicit policy aimed at single parent families, and they can exercise general rights within different social policy systems. While there are some mechanisms aimed at single parents within these systems, they often address solely those single parents who are the only breadwinners, as the other parent is absent or unknown. One of such mechanisms works within the system of child allowances, and a child without one parent or a child with one unknown parent has the right to receive a 15 % higher level of child allowance (Official Gazette No. 94/01). Measures of similar character may be found within the social assistance system.

the equivalent income of single-mother households, and one in four single-mother households in comparison to one in ten single-father households did not have enough money for food the previous year (UNDP, 2006).

Namely, children living in single parent families have the right to a higher level of social assistance – for children living in a single parent family, social assistance amounts to 55 % of the social assistance baseline, in comparison to 40 % of the social assistance baseline for other children. Still, while a single parent who is the only breadwinner is also entitled to higher rate of social assistance (100 % of the social assistance baseline), that is not the case for other single parents (60 % of the social assistance baseline) (Official Gazette No. 157/13, 152/14, 99/15).

In line with the Family Act (Official Gazette No. 103/15) and Act on Temporary Support (Official Gazette No. 92/14), if the parent who does not reside with the child and is bound to contribute to the maintenance of a child does not meet his obligations for a period longer than three months (or his parents, i.e. grandparents of a child), a child has a right to temporary support. The centre for social welfare is obliged to enact a decision on temporary support either on proposal by another parent or ex officio. The child has a right to temporary support until the parent (or grandparents) starts to fulfil his/her obligation to contribute to the maintenance of a child, however, for a maximum period of three years. Amount of temporary support paid by the centre for social welfare equals to 50 % of the minimum amount of child support determined in accordance with the Family Act. Minimum amount of child support is determined as percentage share of the paid net income by employee in Croatia: for child up to the age of 6 – 17 % of average income; for child aged between 7 and 12 – 20 % of average income; for child aged between 13 and 18 – 22 % of average income.

When it comes to the labour market participation of single parents, according to the Labour Act single parents with a child less than six years of age can work long working hours or with unequal working schedule (i.e. longer hours in some period of year, and shorter hours in other periods) only with written consent (Official Gazette No. 93/14).⁴ Also, single parents are identified as a group at risk on the labour market and usually there are ALMP measures available to them. E.g. currently there is a package called “*I posebnost je prednost*” (“And specificity is an advantage”) aimed at vulnerable groups on the labour market where single parent families are one of the target groups. Within the package, a financial support aimed at employment of single parents is offered, as well as support for measures aimed at raising public awareness and awareness of employers for specific needs of vulnerable groups on the labour market. Also, single parent families can use general ALMP measures, if they are more suitable for them (CEO, 2015, Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2015). Additionally, at the local level, some cities or municipalities offer reduced fees for single parent families for participation in early childhood education and care programmes. For example in the city of Zagreb, single parent families pay 75 % of the regular fee for early childhood education and care programmes (Grad Zagreb, 2015). Still, there is a lack of places in early childhood education and care facilities (Matković and Dobrotić, 2013) which causes problems to working parents in general, and notably to single parent families who are additionally faced with lack of informal support.

In the area of parenting support aimed at single parent families, while there were few small local initiatives to address specific problems of single parent families (mainly in bigger cities), they are not sufficient and they are often short-term. Hence, there is a lack of targeted parenting support programmes aimed at single parent families (Pećnik, 2015).

⁴ It must be noted here that studies indicate a problematic implementation of this provision, and that in practice the single parent families are not sufficiently protected at the labour market (Pećnik, 2015).

2. Policy debate

Although the problems the single parent families are facing in Croatia are well known and documented, there are no active policy debates which may bring improvements to their socio-economic position. If we look into actual strategies which may affect the position of single parent families (e.g. National Strategy for the Rights of Children in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020; Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020; National Policy for Gender Equality for the Period 2011 – 2015), they are not addressing the specific needs of single parent families either at the level of problem identification or at the level of proposed policy solutions. The “status quo” and absence of any agenda related to specific problems of single parent families may only worsen their socio-economic position.

3. Transferability aspects

The discussion papers on France and Germany identified some practices interesting for the Croatian case. The most important problems single parent families in Croatia are faced with are related to their financial situation, i.e. their exposure to above-average poverty risk and unfavourable position on the labour market, so it would be interesting to reconsider the French and German practice of providing additional income and practical support to single parent families (either through benefits or taxation system) in combination with activation measures. German experience is particularly interesting, as it points at the importance of a holistic understanding of the inability to work for single parents, i.e. they stressed that labour market integration is not enough and that it has to be followed by appropriate infrastructure for single parents.

Hence, Croatia should reconsider its approach to ALMP measures aimed at single parent families, and move from the practice of financial initiatives aimed at employers who employ single parent families. Instead, the focus should be on building an appropriate support network for single parent families which will facilitate their participation in the labour market (e.g. legal right for a childcare place, affordability and flexibility in childcare services as in France and provision beyond the standard work hours, flexibility on the labour market, legal protection of single parents on the labour market, etc.). While doing this, the problems related to the sustainability of such programmes that Germany experienced should be respected, as only programmes created with a longer perspective may be effective enough. Maybe one solution could be the obligation of the Member States within ESF schemes to continue to support programmes which were evaluated positively, i.e. where evaluation has proved their efficiency.

The work of equal opportunity officers at employment offices in Germany is also of particular interest, as they have very proactive role in approaching employers and in assisting single parent families at the labour market. This practice does not need a lot of financial resources to be implemented, but it may improve the work of employment offices in Croatia, and raise employers' awareness about the needs of single parent families. Co-parenting program implemented in France is also an interesting example which may facilitate the other parents' greater involvement with a child after a separation.

4. Recommendations and conclusions

Single parent families are facing a numerous difficulties and creation of effective system aimed at support to single parent families is a complex issue, which should be tackled at different levels. At the EU level, greater priority should be put on the need to develop an appropriate infrastructure which should facilitate the labour market participation of single parent families, not only by emphasising this point to the Member States, but also by financially supporting those programmes within the ESF or other programmes. Thereby it should be kept in mind that it is important to develop affordable and quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) services, but also after-school programmes and/or similar activities which are aimed at parents with atypical working hours, as well as leisure time activities for children living in single parent families. These issues, as well as the fact that single parent families often cannot afford such programmes are often left out of focus, and should be changed. Also, as single parents are often faced with high stress and children living in single parent families suffer from learning difficulties, more focus should be put on parenting support programmes, including help with school obligations. Within parenting support programs more effort should be put at both parents involvement with a child.

With “ideational” and financial support of the EU, the national governments and local communities should work together to resolve those problems at implementation level. The universal approach in developing benefits and services aimed at families with children should be the first solution. However, they should also develop targeted programmes aimed at income support and work-life balance of single parent families, which should recognise specific care needs and financial constraints of single parent families, and allow them to continuously participate in the labour market. Legislation should be changed with the aim to guarantee children a place in the ECEC services, as well as in after-school programmes, and to facilitate greater flexibility and affordability of service provision. Leisure activities should be provided free of charge, i.e. the mechanisms which will financially support single parent families with these activities should be developed. Special attention should be put on policy solutions which tackle a long-term poverty.

Labour inspectorate should be additionally educated about single parents` needs in order to improve their work in relation to labour market protection of single parent families and control of violations of labour market legislation. Public awareness activities should also be targeted towards employers, who should become more sensitive to specific care needs of single parent families and their smaller informal support networks. They should also take an active role in the process of development of infrastructure which should allow parents to combine family and work obligations (e.g. provide services, flexible working arrangements etc.).

Targeted parenting support programmes (e.g. programmes which will allow them to cope with parenting stress, learning difficulties, behaviour problems etc.) aimed at single parent families should be developed at family centres (or similar institutions whose role is a preventive one). Special attention should be put on co-parenting programs, which should facilitate both parents` presence in child`s life. The idea of a child maintenance fund at national level may be also considered, particularly for those children whose parents are not paying alimony, since existing mechanisms (at least in the case of Croatia) are not enough.

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