

THE RESILIENCE OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND THEIR MEMBERS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN THE LIGHT OF HUNGARIAN AND INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This study examines the resilience of single-parent families through an interdisciplinary lens, utilising both Hungarian and international research. It integrates Walsh's family resilience framework, the Triple Bind theory, and various welfare state models. The analysis shows that approximately 300,000–350,000 single-parent families in Hungary are exposed to a heightened risk of poverty and multiple structural disadvantages. The findings indicate that resilience should be conceptualised not merely as an individual attribute, but as a phenomenon shaped by external support systems and social policies. The study concludes by recommending targeted family policy interventions that address the specific challenges faced by single-parent households and promote broader social cohesion.

Keywords: *resilience, single-parent families, family resilience, welfare state*

INTRODUCTION

The proportion of single-parent families has grown steadily over recent decades in both Hungary and developed countries, presenting new challenges for family policy and the social welfare system. Currently, approximately 300,000–350,000 single-parent families live in Hungary, which accounts for about 20% of families with children (KSH, 2022; Monostori, 2019). These families face a significantly higher risk of poverty: while the poverty rate in the general population is around 12–15%, for single-parent families it reaches 40%, and in cases of unemployment, it rises to 61.5% (KSH, 2022).

An interdisciplinary approach to understanding single-parent families incorporates psychological, sociological, economic, and policy perspectives. Resilience, defined as the capacity to cope with adversity and adapt, is a central concept in family research (Walsh, 2003, 2016; Masten, 2001). However, resilience is better understood as a complex socioecological process shaped by organisational factors, welfare policies, and social resources, rather than solely as an individual or family trait (Ungar, 2011).

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the resilience of single-parent families by integrating Walsh's family resilience model (2003, 2016), the Triple Bind theory (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018), welfare state typologies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferge, 1997; Taylor-Gooby, 2005), and contemporary theories of inequality (Piketty, 2015; Atkinson, 2014). The analysis draws on empirical research from both Hungarian and international contexts and evaluates the effectiveness of different welfare models.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Froma Walsh's (2003, 2016) family resilience model is built on three main pillars: belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes. Belief systems include the interpreting difficulties, sustaining a positive outlook, and holding transcendent values. Organizational

patterns encompass flexibility, cohesion, and social and economic resources. Communication processes refer to explicit communication, open emotional expression, and joint problem-solving.

According to Walsh's model, family resilience is not a static state but a dynamic, changing process that enables families to maintain their functioning and grow even during crises. This model is especially relevant for single-parent families, who commonly experience multiple stressors, including economic difficulties, time pressure, social stigma, and limited support networks (Pedro, n.d.; Salin et al., 2023). Numerous empirical studies support the applicability of Walsh's model in single-parent families. Morais and colleagues (2023) validated the Walsh Family Resilience Questionnaire in a Portuguese sample, showing its reliability as a measure of family resilience. Duncan and colleagues (2020) also confirmed the model's psychometric properties and illustrated its practical usefulness in family interventions.

Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado's (2018) Triple Bind model identifies three interconnected constraints that determine the situation of single-parent families. Single-parent families typically possess a single source of income, which constitutes a structural economic disadvantage. Income conditions differ significantly from those of two-parent families; in the United States, the average wealth of single-parent families is 83% lower, in Germany 72% lower, and in Great Britain 63% lower. In the majority of single-parent households, women carry a double burden, serving as both breadwinners and household heads. This often leads them to take part-time or lower-paying jobs, further deepening economic disadvantages (Hübgen, 2018; Salin et al., 2023).

In many countries, family policy and welfare systems are structured around the traditional two-parent family model, often failing to address the specific needs of single-parent families (Herke, 2024; Maldonado, 2022).

The Triple Bind model highlights that the resilience of single-parent families is not simply a matter of individual capabilities, but is strongly determined by structural factors. According to the model, effective support is possible only if all three constraints are addressed simultaneously through an integrated policy approach (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

Esping-Andersen's (1990) classic welfare state typology distinguishes three main models: liberal, conservative-corporatist, and social democratic. These models handle single-parent families differently (see Table 1).

Table 1. Typology of welfare states

Walfare model	Characteristics	Situation of single-parent families	Example countries
Liberal	Market-based, minimal state intervention, targeted support	High poverty risk, strong labor market dependence, stigmatization	USA, UK, Canada
Conservative-corporatist	Status-preserving, family-centric, traditional family model	Medium poverty risk, limited childcare services, "male breadwinner" norm	Germany, Austria, Hungary
Social democratic	Universal entitlements, strong state role, gender equality	Low poverty risk, extensive childcare, support for work-family balance	Sweden, Denmark, Finland

Source: Own editing based on Esping-Andersen (1990), Hübgen (2018), Nieuwenhuis (2022)

Zsuzsa Ferge (1997) classified the Hungarian welfare system as conservative-corporatist, emphasizing its paternalistic and family-centric characteristics. Following the regime change, the Hungarian welfare state experienced significant transformation, shifting toward targeted support and reducing the emphasis on universal benefits (Szikra, 2013).

Taylor-Gooby (2005) introduced the concept of the "investor state," which prioritises investment in human capital over traditional income transfers. This approach is especially relevant for single-parent families, as childcare services, education, and training can be more effective in the long run than mere income support (Daly & Uzunalioglu, 2022).

Thomas Piketty (2015), in his work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, showed that the return on capital (r) exceeds the rate of economic growth (g) in the long term, leading to the inheritance and deepening of inequalities. This $r > g$ relationship has particularly severe consequences for single-parent families, who usually lack significant wealth and thus have limited capital (Morelli et al., 2022). According to Piketty's analysis, wealth inequalities are much greater than income inequalities, and wealth concentration is returning to 19th-century levels. For single-parent families, this means that even if they manage to increase their labour income, their wealth disadvantage persists, resulting in intergenerational disadvantages (Piachaud, 2014; Seguino, 2021).

Anthony Atkinson (2014) distinguished between inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome, as well as intrinsic (valuable in itself) and instrumental (tool-like) arguments for reducing inequality. In the case of single-parent families, both types of arguments are relevant: equality is a value in itself (intrinsic) and a means to increase societal cohesion and economic efficiency (instrumental) (Nolan & Whelan, 2017).

According to Michael Ungar's (2011) social ecology regarding resilience model, resilience is not simply an individual trait, but the result of the interaction between the person and their environment. The model recognises four main dimensions: individual capacities, family and community resources, cultural and social context, and physical environment.

According to Ann Masten's (2001) "ordinary magic" concept, resilience is not an extraordinary ability but the result of normal developmental processes. This means that if basic protective factors are provided (stable care, adequate resources, an encouraging community), most children and families will be able to cope with difficulties. Coleman's (1988) social capital theory complements this approach by emphasising the role of social relationships and norms in forming individual and family well-being. Single-parent families often have limited social capital, which reduces their coping capacity (Taylor & Conger, 2017)

THE SITUATION OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES IN HUNGARY AND EUROPE

The number of single-parent families in Hungary has increased steadily over recent decades. Data from the Central Statistical Office (KSH, 2022) indicate that approximately 300,000–350,000 single-parent families currently reside in Hungary, representing about 20% of families with children. In the majority of these families (85-90%), the parent is a woman, reflecting traditional patterns of post-divorce child custody and prevailing gender role norms (Monostori, 2019).

The most common reasons for becoming a single-parent family are: divorce or the dissolution of a cohabiting relationship (60-65%), widowhood (10-15%), and being a single parent from birth (20-25%). The number of divorces in Hungary has been high since the 1980s, though a slight decrease has been observed in recent years. At the same time, the proportion of children born outside of marriage has increased significantly, resulting in the emergence of new types of single-parent families (Monostori, 2019).

In a European comparison, Hungary can be classified among countries with a conservative-corporatist welfare model, where the proportion of single-parent families is medium (15-25%), but their risk of poverty is high. The lowest proportion of single parents is found in Mediterranean

countries (Italy, Greece: 10-15%), while the highest is observed in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries (Sweden, UK: 25-30%) (Eurostat, 2021).

The poverty risk of single-parent families in Hungary is exceptionally high. According to KSH (2022) data, 40% of single-parent families live below the poverty line, compared to 15% of two-parent families. In the case of unemployment, this rate rises to 61.5%, showing the critical role of employment in preventing poverty.

However, the labour market picture is complex. The employment rate of single parents in Hungary is around 65-70%, which is a medium value in European comparison. However, the quality of employment is often problematic: single parents work in part-time, lower-paying jobs in greater proportions and have fewer career development opportunities (Herke, 2024). The gender wage gap further worsens the situation, as women in Hungary earn on average 15-20% less than men, which has particularly severe consequences for single mothers (Hübgen, 2018). Due to childcare responsibilities, single parents are often forced to take flexible, lower-paying jobs, which reduces their human capital and long-term career prospects.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit single-parent families particularly hard. Research by Salin and colleagues (2023) among Finnish single mothers found that, during lockdowns, these families faced extreme time pressure, increased caregiving burdens, and economic uncertainty. Managing telework and distance education simultaneously was especially difficult for a single parent, resulting in increased stress and burnout.

Hungarian family policy has experienced a significant transformation over the past decade, with an increased emphasis on pronatalist objectives. The government has allocated substantial resources to expand the family support system, including the family tax allowance, CSOK (Family Housing Allowance), the baby-waiting loan, and the grandparental GYED (childcare fee) (Barzó, 2023; Krekó et al., 2023). However, these measures primarily favour the traditional, two-parent, married-family model. Research by Herke (2024) indicates that, although public opinion in Hungary supports assistance for single-parent families, policy design often fails to address their specific needs. Single-parent families are frequently excluded from certain supports (for example, the baby-waiting loan is available only to married couples), or the level of support does not adequately compensate for structural. The redistributive impact of Hungarian family policy remains limited. Analysis by Krekó and colleagues (2023) demonstrates that the family tax allowance and family allowance system are regressive, with higher-income families receiving greater absolute support than low-income families. This structure is particularly disadvantageous for single-parent families, who are often part of lower-income groups. Childcare service availability also causes challenges. Despite an increase in nursery places in recent years, significant shortages persist, especially in smaller settlements. Although kindergarten care is nearly universal, its opening hours frequently do not align with full-time employment, hindering single parents' participation in the labour market (Duman & Horvath, 2010).

RESILIENCE MECHANISMS AND COPING STRATEGIES

Based on Walsh's (2003, 2016) model, the resilience of single-parent families manifests in three main dimensions. At the level of belief systems, single parents often reinterpret their situation, building a positive narrative out of difficulties. Pedro's (n.d.) South African research found that single mothers living in poverty consciously use strategies to strengthen their children's resilience, including developing a positive self-image, emphasising the value of education, and mobilising spiritual resources.

Regarding organisational patterns, single-parent families frequently establish flexible role-sharing. Children take on greater responsibility for household tasks relative to their age, which is a burden on the one hand, yet also develops their independence and competence on the other. The

support of extended family networks (grandparents, siblings) can be a critical protective factor, though this differs considerably among cultures and social contexts (Taylor & Conger, 2017).

The quality of communication processes is decisive in family resilience. Open, honest communication between parent and child helps process the trauma of divorce or loss and strengthens family cohesion. At the same time, single parents are often overburdened, which can reduce the time and energy devoted to quality communication (Salin et al., 2023).

Coping strategies among single parents include problem-focused coping (e.g., active job searching, participating in training), emotion-focused coping (e.g., seeking social support, relaxation techniques), and meaning-focused coping (e.g., reinterpreting the situation, mobilising spiritual resources). Effective coping generally entails a combination of these, customised to the particular demands of the situation (Masten, 2001).

According to Coleman's (1988) social capital theory, social relationships and norms are critical resources for individual and family well-being. Single-parent families often have limited social capital, which reduces their resilience capacity. Divorce or separation often leads to a constriction of the social network, especially if mutual friends take one party's side (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Community support may take various forms: informal support (family, friends), formal support (social services, NGOs), and self-organising support groups (communities of single parents). Waldegrave and colleagues' (2016) New Zealand study found that community support significantly reduces the financial stress of single-parent families and improves their mental health.

Digital technologies create new opportunities for social support. Online single-parent communities, forums, and social networking groups enable the exchange of information, emotional support, and practical advice, especially for those who are geographically isolated or have limited time (Salin et al., 2023).

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON AND GOOD PRACTICES

International comparative research clearly shows that the type of welfare state is decisive in the poverty risk of single-parent families. Analysing data from 25 European countries, Hübgen (2018) showed that in countries with a social democratic welfare model (Sweden, Denmark, Finland), the poverty rate of single-parent families is around 10-15%, while in conservative-corporatist (Germany, Austria, Hungary) and liberal (UK, Ireland) models, this is between 25-40%.

In Scandinavian countries, nursery and kindergarten care is almost universal, affordable, and of high quality, enabling single parents to work full-time. In contrast, in conservative-corporatist countries, childcare is often a family responsibility with limited state support (Van Lancker, 2018). Scandinavian countries employ active labour market policies, including training programs, job placement, and flexible working time regulations. These policies are particularly useful for single parents who need to reconcile work and care (Sakamoto, 2024). In Scandinavian countries, universal family allowances and targeted single-parent supplements together ensure a minimum income.

In contrast, in liberal countries, targeted, income-tested benefits are often stigmatising and insufficient to prevent poverty (Cancian & Meyer, 2018). Scandinavian countries pursue strong gender equality policies, including paternity leave, flexible working hours, and equal pay. These policies reduce the gender wage gap and improve women's labour market status, which is especially important for single mothers (Nieuwenhuis, 2022).

Based on international good practices, several effective social policy solutions can be identified. Dutch and Belgian examples show that the combination of flexible working hours, telework opportunities, and high-quality childcare significantly improves the employment and income levels of single parents (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). The French model, which provides universal, state-funded kindergarten and nursery care, effectively reduces the poverty risk of single-parent

families. The availability and affordability of services are critical factors (Verbist & Van Lancker, 2015).

The UK's Universal Credit system—although heavily criticised—attempts to integrate various benefits and incentivise employment. However, experiences have been mixed, especially due to bureaucratic obstacles and delayed payments (Horneman & Marx, 2018).

Effective child support collection systems in Scandinavian countries ensure that single parents receive the due support from the other parent. If the other parent fails to pay, the state advances the maintenance and then collects it from the obligor (Hakovirta & Mesiäislehto, n.d.). In the United States and Canada, experimental wealth-building programs (such as Individual Development Accounts and Child Trust Funds) seek to help low-income families, including single-parent families, accumulate savings and build wealth. These programs can be more effective in the long term than simple income transfers (Morelli et al., 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The resilience of single-parent families constitutes a complex, multi-level phenomenon arising through interplay of individual, family, and organizational factors. This study demonstrates that, although single parents and their children frequently exhibit considerable resilience, structural disadvantages such as limited resources, employment constraints, and inadequate policies (Triple Bind) significantly reduce their well-being and life prospects.

Walsh's family resilience model (2003, 2016) provides a useful framework for understanding family-level coping mechanisms, but an analysis of structural inequalities must supplement this. The works of Piketty (2015) and Atkinson (2014) point out that wealth inequality is inherited from generation to generation, with particularly severe consequences for single-parent families.

An international comparison clearly shows that the type of welfare state is decisive for single-parent families. Countries with a social democratic model—universal childcare services, active labour market policies, and strong gender equality measures—effectively reduce the poverty risk for single-parent families. In contrast, the conservative-corporatist model, to which Hungary also belongs, prefers the traditional family model, resulting in structural disadvantages for single-parent families. Hungarian family policy mobilises significant resources, but these primarily support two-parent, married families. Taking into account the specific needs of single-parent families, introducing focused support, and improving work-family balance are necessary to reduce poverty and strengthen resilience.

In conclusion, resilience should be understood not as an extraordinary ability, but as the outcome of typical developmental processes when basic protective factors are present (Masten, 2001). Policy objectives should focus on providing structural protective factors such as stable income, adequate housing, quality childcare, and supportive communities, rather than solely fostering individual resilience. This "ordinary magic" perspective underscores that supporting single-parent families is a social investment that yields long-term benefits, including reduced poverty, improved child outcomes, and enhanced social cohesion.

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