

# Romanian single-parent families: quality of life

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**Abstract**—The increasing divorce and fertility rates outside of marriage, the changing values in the last decades have led to a high prevalence of single parent families. Currently, worldwide, single-parent families represent about a quarter of all families. Recent changes occurring in the structure of single-parent families and also the multitude of factors that influence the quality of life of these families require the development of new research tools in order to provide foundations for social policies addressed to this type of family. *The purpose* of this paper is to present an analysis concerning the quality of life for single parent families in Romania, based on data collected through a research methodology developed by the authors within a scientific research project funded by a national grant called Partnerships in priority areas.

**Keywords**—family policies, quality of life, single-parent families, work-life balance

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE quality of family life is an important indicator for assessing the efficiency of family policies. The methodology used to assess quality of life for single parent families from Romania was based on a quantitative component (face-to-face questionnaire based survey among carers of single-parent families, nationally representative based sample consisting of 855 households, 95% confidence level, with +/- 5% sampling error) and a qualitative component (3 focus groups with carers of single parent families and 12 in-depth interviews with persons having duties, attributions and responsibilities in one of the institutions involved in providing social benefits and services for single parent families). In designing the research instruments the research team used a mix of social and economic indicators. Data collecting was conducted during September-November 2010. The hypothesis of this approach is that single-parent families, in comparison with traditional families, face in a greater extent with material difficulties, especially as the number of children in care is higher. *The results* confirm the initial hypothesis, demonstrating that these households are prevented from

reaching, in most cases, the average living standard of society in general and of other categories of households in particular. In this article the authors will present a series of results obtained from field survey and conducted focus groups.

## II. SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES IN ROMANIA - SHORT PORTRAIT

The quality of single parent family life is the final output of policies and services provided to individuals and their families. Families experience a high level of quality of life when their needs are met, when they enjoy spending time with family members and when they are able to achieve things that are important to them. Quality of life for single-parent families refers to: *relations and interaction with nuclear family members and with extended family members, practice of parental function, emotional wellbeing and supporting devices accessible to families in order to exercise their functions*. The assessing process of all these dimensions is important for measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of government policies designed to protect single-parent family and good functionality for this type of family.

In the first part of this article we present a brief portrait of the single-parent families from Romania, following that, in the second part, we approach issues related to incomes of those families and, in the third, part we analyze perceptions about the quality of family life.

From a sociological point of view, single parent family can be defined as a social group established on the basis of kinship relations between a parent (single parent) and child/children, a group characterized by emotional states, aspirations and shared values. Single-parent families have become an important and permanent feature of many existing societies [1]. The old family structures are increasingly giving way to other forms of family life. Through its mechanisms, the traditional society disavowed the phenomenon of single-parent families and encouraged stigmatization of those who chose, intentionally or not, this lifestyle. Today, thanks to the emergence and generalization of the nuclear family, the rupture between traditional community and nuclear family has allowed changing the vision and perception of this type of household. In environments that support optimal child development, classic family is not so important. In many cases for a child is more appropriate a single-parent family than a family where there are strife and problems. If in the past families experiencing unsuccessful marriages had to remain together for the sake of children, today experts assert it is

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better for children if parents split up rather than be subjected to permanent stress generated by the conflict between parents.

It should be noted the alternative nature of single-parent families which should not be seen as a deviated or abnormal type of family. Single parenting becomes normal when there is an increased frequency of single-parent families in society [2]. In this context, the attitude towards this type of family has evolved, more or less, depending on the areas, their cultural development, in the end becoming a common conduct in present societies.

According to the latest Romanian Census in 2002 single parent families represented a percentage of 13.4 of total families, being distributed different among residential areas, 7.7% in urban and 5.7% in rural areas [3]. Comparing the situation in 2002 with the previous census (1992) it finds that, in both censuses, type core consisting of husband and wife with children was dominant, over half of the families were included in this category. This fact shows that social relations of coexistence based on traditional nuclear family still prevails in Romania. A traditional nuclear family consists of a married couple and their biological child or children. A comparative analysis between the two censuses shows differences in family structure: the proportion of couples with children reduced by 3.5 percentages in favour of single-parent families. Since the end of this year there will be a new census conducted in Romania, it is expected that the number recorded for these types of families to be higher. The increase in the share of single parent families at the expense of other types of families (couples with or without children) could be seen as a threat to the family and to the society development. The magnitude and development of this phenomenon lead us to believe that single-parent families represent increasingly more an alternative to normal - traditional family.

Single-parent family (consisting of a single parent with one or more children) occurs either after divorce, when children are given into the care of one parent (usually the mother - tongue forming single-parent family) or following the death of a spouse / partner or if raising children outside marriage. In October 2010, the survey data developed in order to assess quality of life for in single-parent families shows that 81.5% of lone parents interviewed were single-parent mother families. In the cases of single mothers, our survey confirms that the first difficulty they experience is one of a financial nature.

Beyond the economic issues single mothers may face difficulties in exercising the parental role and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Within the family with both parents, distribution of responsibilities and of the parental role is made in the complementary and compensatory direction. Single mother may be put in a situation of increased tension and strain in the adoption of parental role (the expansion of the role with auxiliary tasks). This coverage of simultaneous parental roles takes time, energy and may lead to tense situations.

Asked if they tried to rebuild family life so that children can be raised by two parents, mother and father, survey

respondents preferred not to answer to this question in a rather high percentage: 25.1%, which denotes the sensitivity of the subject addressed. Most respondents, 49.4%, did nothing to change the status of single-parent family. Only 25.5% have tried to do so by mentioning reasons primarily related to the desire to have a normal family (normality was found in families with two parents, allowing full enjoyment of family functions), such as can be seen in the figure below.

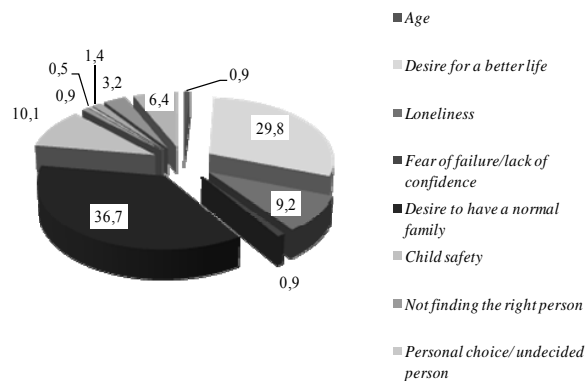


Fig. 1 Do you think your own children may be disadvantaged compared with other children simply by belonging to a single parent family?, responses by educational level of parents (%)

Living in a family where one parent is missing presumed to face the major problems related to family interaction with the environment (relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, state institutions) and intra-familial relationships. We emphasize again that the alternative nature of this type of family is not a deviant or abnormal type. From a sociological point of view single parenting becomes normal when there is an increased frequency of single-parent families in the present societies.

Disapproval of single parenting at community level and in extenso at society level was one of the items used in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked about the association between single-parent family status and the existence of a perceived inferior position in society compared with the family consisting of two parents and children. The results showed that, when referring to Romanian society in general compared with belonging community, the tendency that single parent family to be perceived as having an inferior position compared with the family consisting of two parents and children, perceived as normal family, is more pronounced. This demonstrates that the influence of the perceptions that marginalize this type of family is still strong. However percentages are not very high, more than half of respondents saying that being a single parent family does not cause an inferior position for these families compared with the family consisting of two parents and children. We mention that 20.2% of respondents chose not pronounce on this subject.

Although the economic situation of single parent families affects, first of all, the parent, children face the economic consequences of this situation later. As a result, many families

develop specific adapting strategies, but despite these strategies, the difficulties that single-parent families experience remain real. Single-parent families where the parent has a high educational level associated with a well-paid job providing a satisfactory quality of life for the family are those who respond in the highest percentage that their children are not disadvantaged compared with others, simply by belonging to a single-parent family.

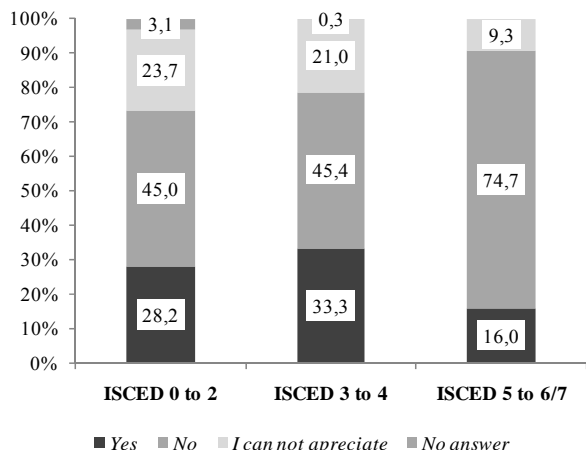


Fig. 2 Do you think your own children may be disadvantaged compared with other children simply by belonging to a single parent family?, responses by educational level of parents (%)

Single-parent family status is not perceived as an element of disadvantage in *seeking a job* or *maintaining a job*, as the survey data showed. Only 17.9% of respondents believe that the fact itself of being a parent in single-parent family causes problems in *seeking a job* and 13.6% in *maintaining a job*. When referring to time spent with their children or friends, percentages of those who say that single-parent family is an impediment in achieving these goals is 23.5% for *time spent with their children* and 26.9% for the *time spent with friends*. The economic situation of single parent family requires special measures (longer working hours in most cases) and duties that put pressure on the sole earner of the family.

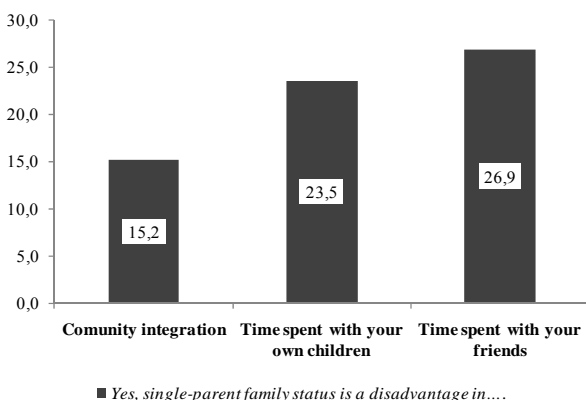
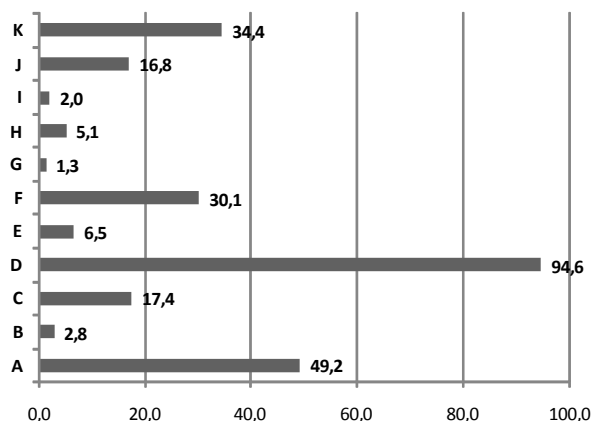


Fig. 3 Do you think single parent family status is a disadvantage in: community integration, time spent with your own children, time spent with your friends? (%)

Synthesizing the ideas presented in this first part of the article we may assert that the greatest difficulties faced by Romanian single parent families are, according to participants in focus groups and field survey, the material and emotional problems (both parent and child/children). Stability of single parent family is considered more fragile, this type of family being more exposed in times of crisis, when they are losing their jobs easier. The presence of a single salary earning leads to material difficulties, just as we argue in the second part of the article. However, most respondents do not believe that the material problems are a defining element only for the single-parent families, families with two parents also facing material problems.

### III. INCOMES OF SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

State allowance for children (child benefit) is the most commonly mentioned source of income for single parent families investigated by the field survey (94.6% of respondents respond that the state allowance for children is a part of their family income). The second source of income - by the number of the mentions - is represented by the salary earnings. Thus, almost half of respondents (49.2%) say that the salary is part of their family's current income. A smaller number of respondents state that they were working, but not as employees. They say they are earning their incomes from independent activities (16.8%).



- Legend
- A salary earnings
  - B unemployment indemnity
  - C pension
  - D state allowance for children (child benefit)
  - E complementary family allowance
  - F support allowance for single parent families
  - G indemnity for child rearing
  - H social aid on ensuring the minimum guaranteed income
  - I social exchange study
  - J income from independent activities
  - K other sources of income

Fig. 4 What kind of income does your family receive? (%)

With regard to support allowance for single parent families, approximately one third of the single parents were receiving, at the time of the filed survey, this type of income (30.1%). Support allowance for single parent families is a social benefit granted by the Romanian state for families composed by one parent and dependent children aged under 18 and living with the single parent, if the net monthly income per family member is under the value of the net minimum wage per month [4]. The amount of the allowance varies depending on the number of dependent children. In contrast, far fewer families participating at the survey were receiving the complementary family allowance (6.5%). This social benefit is actually a family income supplement. This allowance is granted only to families with both parents, and for this reason the fact that some of the respondents included in the field survey state that they receive this type of income may be at least intriguing [4]. However, almost 10% of the investigated parents were single parents because they were separated from their spouses without being divorced from them. So, although in reality the parents having children in their care are single parents, they appear in the records of authorities as a family composed of husband, wife and children, which gives them the right to request and receive this kind of social benefit.

Only 2.8% of parents participating at the survey were benefiting from unemployment indemnity and about 5% from the parents were receiving a social aid on ensuring the minimum guaranteed income. The latter is a social benefit granted by the Romanian state for families and for single persons. The amount of this social aid is determined as the difference between the minimum guaranteed income and the net monthly income of the family or of the single person. The amount of the monthly minimum guaranteed income level varies depending on the number of the family members and it is indexed annually by Government Decision [5]. People able to work who receive social aid are required to give evidence, every three months, that they are in the evidence of the territorial agency for employment, in order to find a job, and that they have not refused a job nor participating to services for stimulating participation in employment and vocational training offered by these agencies. Also, for the amounts granted as social aid, one of the family members with working age has the obligation to provide monthly, at the request of the Mayor, action or works of local interest, without exceeding the normal working time and in compliance with security and hygiene norms at the working place.

Some of the respondents added at family's income also the income from pensions (17.4%), because they were living with at least one of the parents (grandparents of their children) who were pensioners. Other incomes reported by respondents included in the survey were: alimony, survivor pension, financial support from relatives (especially the grandparents of children) and/or incomes from labour by day, as day labourers.

Alimony represents a right of minor children resulting from a marriage and granted, according to the Romanian state law requirements, from the incomes of the parent who does not

receive custody for the child/children after the divorce. After custody of one parent, upon request, the other parent will be forced by court to pay a pension known as alimony, compulsory payment, which will be paid until the child reaches the age of 18, and if he continued his studies until graduation, but no later than age of 26. The amount of alimony is fixed by court order, as a percentage of the income of the parent who owes alimony, the percentage depending on the number of children, but cannot exceed half the net income from employment of the spouse liable for payment [7].

The survivor pension is an income received by surviving children from the social security system, following the death of one parent, whether the deceased parent was retired or a prerequisite for obtaining a pension. The survivor pension is granted until the child reaches the age of 18 or until the age of 26 years if he continues its studies. The quantum of the survivor pension depends on the amount of income of the deceased parent and on the number of surviving children [6].

Summarizing all this information presented by the families included in the field survey regarding their incomes, it is clear that most single parents manage to ensure their daily lives through paid work (63.8%). However, some of the investigated families have a very low standard of living, relying only on incomes from the social benefits system (13.5%) or on incomes from the social benefit system and also financial help received from their relatives (4.9%). Another aspect to be pointed out with reference to the living standards of single parent families included in the field survey is that, for families who receive income also from the social benefit system, incomes received from the social benefit system were about 23% of total revenue of these single-parent families at the time of the survey. On the other hand, the living standard of single parent families included in the field survey is undoubtedly closely related to the occupational status of parents. Thus, as shown in the figure below, parents included in the field survey are generally employees (48.9%) or self-employed (14.9%). However, a quarter of parents being investigated have an occupational status from which they do not earn money: house persons (13.9%), unpaid unemployed (5.4%) or contributing family workers (6.2%).

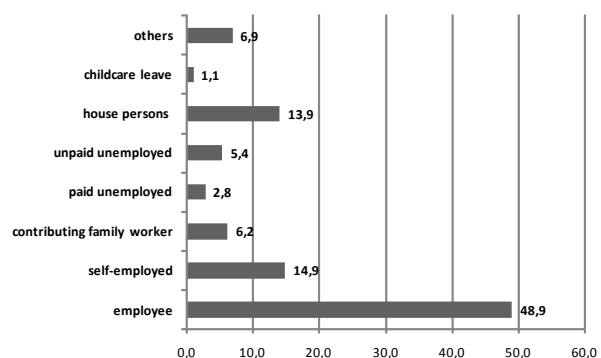


Fig. 5 What is your occupational status? (%)

For many single parents who have to find a job, finding a job is a very difficult thing to do, but this think is not related to the fact that they are single parents. Finding a job itself is a difficult thing to do, especially in time of crisis. Most parents included in the field survey and having a job (whether they were employees or self-employed) state that they had that job before becoming a single parent (41.1%).

The other group of parents, those who found a job after becoming a single parent, generally state that it has been difficult (10.9%) and very difficult (29.6%) to find a job. 35.5% of respondents who found a job after acquiring the status of single-parent breadwinner say that it was not hard to find a job while only 4.4% respond that their status has been helpful in finding a job and 5.9% of the parents say that it was not more difficult for them to find a job as it would have been if the family had both parents.

An issue to be pointed out is the fact that women reported a higher weight that is very difficult to find a job (11.8%) compared with the proportion of men who argue the same point of view (6.8%), as seen in the figure below.

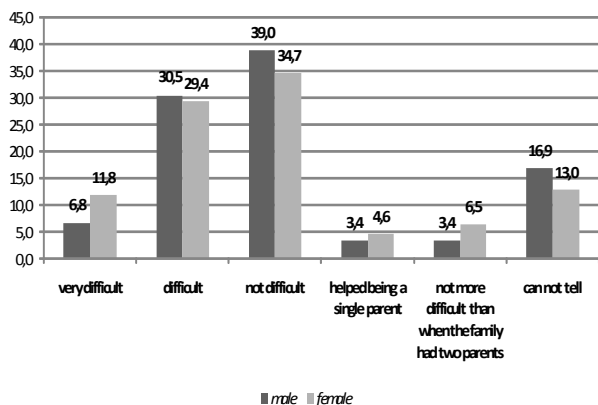


Fig. 6 As single-parent breadwinner, how difficult was it for you to find your current job? (%)

Women are also the ones who feel in a greater extent the difficulty of maintaining their job in relation to the status of single parent breadwinner (6.5% of the investigated women during the field survey say that it is very difficult to keep their current job, compared with only 2.9% of men).

On the other hand, women are also the ones who receive more understanding at the workplace, that leading them to say that single-parent breadwinner status helps them keeping their job. In contrast, men generally consider that their status of single parent does not offer them any advantages nor disadvantage them, and that it is not difficult for them to keep their job.

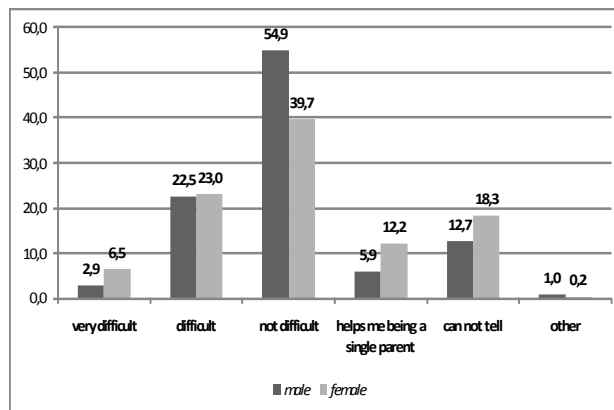


Fig. 7 As single-parent breadwinner, how difficult is it for you to keep your current job? (%)

Being asked to appreciate how they manage to maintain a balance between work and family life, most parents included in the field survey respond that it is neither difficult nor easy for them to maintain this balance (38.7%). However, in this regard also, women and men differ slightly, in the sense that 42.2% of women say they find it difficult or very difficult to maintain a balance between work and family life, compared with 34.5% of men who make the same statements. The percentage of single parents who declare that they manage with difficulty to maintain a balance between work and family life is higher among parents who take care for more than one child or who take care for young children ranging from 0 to 5 years. The qualitative study also shows that most single parents receive understanding from their superiors at the workplace when it comes to personal problems, especially when their problems relate to children. During focus-groups, parents say that these support measures provided by the superiors/employers are informal, on the one hand, and on the other hand, their co-workers are not as sympathetic when single parents have to take some time off from work in order to solve a family problem.

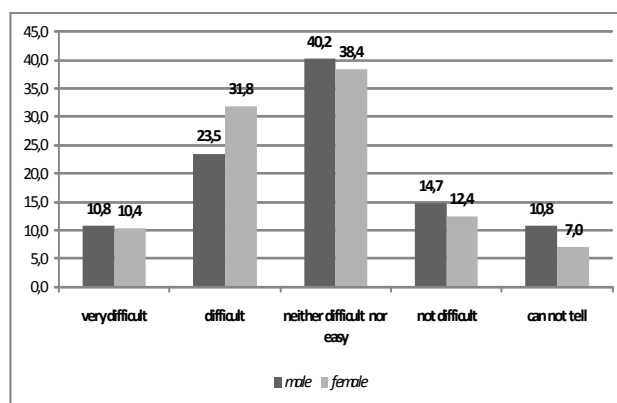


Fig. 8 How would you assess the way you manage to maintain a balance between work and family life?

#### IV. PERCEPTIONS ON QUALITY OF LIFE

##### A. Family budget

Families included in the field survey state that they spend the most part of the family budget by buying food for their family. Generally, about 50% of family budget is spent for family nutrition and about 25% of family budget is invested in education and child care. The remaining money is spent for family health, for free time activities and only a very small part of the budget gets to be saved. During focus-groups also, parents say that they spend a considerable part of the family budget for expenses related to children's education: teaching materials, textbooks, etc.

Expenditure on children's education are also high since parents, because of their long working hours program and because of the lack of the second parent, are forced to choose kindergartens with long day care or after-school programs, these being care services partially or non-subsidized by the state.

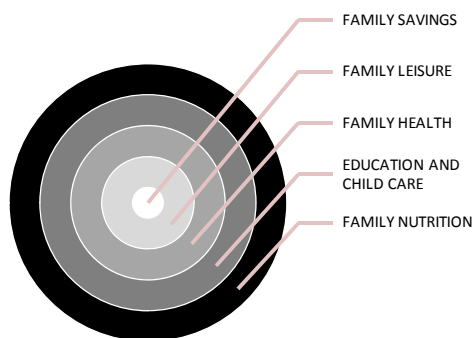


Fig. 9 How much do you assign / you should assign from the family budget for costs of family nutrition, education and childcare, family health, family leisure, family savings?

Being asked how much money should normally be allocated for the same list of expenses from the figure above, single parents included in the field survey did not change their priorities. They believe that they should allocate the most part of the family budget still on expenses related to family nutrition and followed also by the expenses related to education and care of their children. Low salary earnings from Romania in relation to high food prices make them believe that, even if they had higher incomes than those of reality, family nutrition would still remain a priority at the expense of leisure or family savings, especially because, at the time of the survey, food prices were higher compared to previous years, as an effect of the global economic crisis.

Although the list of expenses maintains the same hierarchy, parents declare that they would like to be able to allocate a higher share from the family budget on costs related to education and childcare and also on leisure-related expenditures and for family savings, thus spending less money for family nutrition.

##### B. "Time" resource

Moving from "money" resource to "time" resource, we present, in the following, parents' answers when they were asked, during the field survey, to rank a series of activities that take place in a normal day depending on the time allocated to these specific activities. Activities that parents were asked to rank were: *activities related to education and childcare, housework, leisure time spent with friends, work.*

Thus, parents reported that work occupies most of their time, on the second place being named activities related to education and childcare, followed on the third place by activities related to housework, while leisure-related activities occupy the least of the parents' time. The fact that most of the parents' time is used for activities related to their job is not surprising, given the fact that Romania, as a member of the European Union, is one of the states with the highest average number of weekly hours worked compared with other EU countries, and also given the fact that employees enjoy in a lesser degree of flexible working programme, compared with other European countries [8]. Besides, among employed single parents included in the field survey, only 1.6% benefit from flexible working programmes. The lack of time is an issue mentioned also by the parents included in the qualitative study. During focus-groups, single parents confess that dividing time between work, housework, time spent with their children and personal life is a true challenge for them. Many participants in focus-groups say that, without the other parent, they ask for the support of grandparents in caring for and educating their children, and that the end of the week is often reserved by parents to make homework and educational exercises with their children against recreational activities.

Asked what would be the hierarchy that they would like to apply from the perspective of time for the same activities listed above, single parents included in the field survey said they would like to spend most of their time with activities regarding the care and education of their children, on the second position being listed activities related to their job and then the activities related to household chores and leisure.

The fact that parents feel they do not spend enough time with their children is an issue that was revealed also in the qualitative study. During focus-groups, parents say they would like to be able to opt for a shorter work schedule so they can spend more time with their children.

##### C. Satisfaction of single parent breadwinners

Being asked to evaluate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied they are regarding some aspects of their lives, parents have given scores with modal values between 5 and 8, as shown in the figure below. The aspects of their lives that parents were asked to evaluate referred to: the level of their education, their jobs, their homes, their family life and education of their children.

Educational level generally received scores with values between 4 and 8, the lowest scores being recorded among parents with low educational level, as expected. The higher the educational level of the respondents, the higher is the

score assigned by the single parents for the satisfaction on their educational level.

In terms of job satisfaction, the modal score is 8, which means that most working parents are rather satisfied with their job. The value of the scores given by parents related to the job satisfaction is related to the income levels achieved by the working single parents. So, the higher the single parents' salary, the higher is the score assigned to job satisfaction.

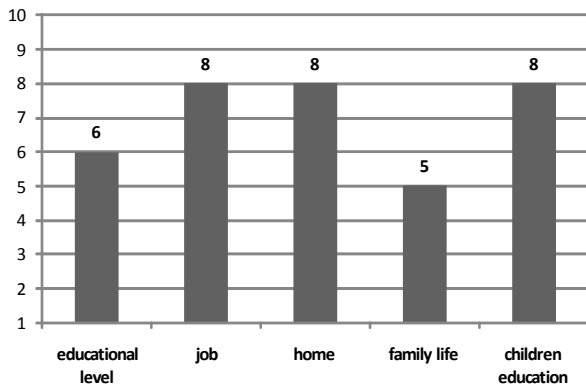


Fig. 10 Please evaluate on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means totally satisfied, how satisfied are you with the following aspects of your life...

Regarding single parents' satisfaction with their homes, the modal score is also 8. Most respondents gave scores ranged between 5 and 8; the highest scores were given by respondents living in homes owned by them. Most respondents who are not satisfied with their homes are those who live in a building for which they pay rent.

Satisfaction with family life is lower compared to other aspects of life that respondents were asked to evaluate. Thus, most parents have given scores ranged between 3 and 6, and the modal score is 5 when evaluating satisfaction with family life. In other words, single parents included in the field survey declared themselves neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their family life. This result is reinforced by another aspect that has emerged from the qualitative study, namely that, although a single parent family has the advantage of being more united, the relationship between child and parent and being closer, filling the role of the other parent would entail a number of difficulties that parents must face. Thus, some participants in focus-groups, especially single mothers, said they had difficulties in monitoring their children and in imposing their authority because children hardly accept that the other parent is not a part of their family. Ensuring a stable and comfortable environment is something even more difficult to archive as the single parent does not own a dwelling or does not have a stable job. This leads to a state of insecurity which affects family life, for which reason, in the field survey, when they were asked to assess their satisfaction with family life, parents are rather self-contained.

The degree of satisfaction among investigate parents is higher when they are asked to assess their satisfaction with the

education of their children. Most parents have given scores ranged between 5 and 10, which means that parents are generally satisfied with the education of their children; some of them are even totally satisfied.

## V.CONCLUSION

Synthesizing the ideas presented in this article we may assert that the greatest difficulties faced by Romanian single parent families are the material and the emotional problems (both for parents and for children). Although single-parent family status is not perceived as an element of disadvantage by the investigated subjects, Romanian single parents admit that children with only one parent has different needs, especially emotional ones. Parents need to work harder in order to compensate the lack of income from the missing parent. Because of that it is hard for them to find enough time in order to deal with the emotional problems of their children and also to find time for themselves.

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