

## VULNERABLE GROUPS AND QUALITY OF LIFE: LITERATURE INSIGHTS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The number of single-parent families is constantly increasing, and is one of the most vulnerable groups experiencing social exclusion and poverty. As a result of society's negative perception of this group, but also the lack of interest from public authorities, many single-parent families face social marginalisation, but also a low standard of living caused by limited access to the education system and health services, limited financial resources, lack of basic food or poor living conditions. Therefore, the present study aims to highlight the social problems faced by single-parent families by reviewing the research results of several studies in the literature that analyse the factors affecting the quality of life in single-parent families, the development in normal conditions of the next generation, who are at risk of facing the same problems and difficulties, and the aspects that influence the access of the vulnerable group on the labour market.*

**KEYWORDS:** *quality of life, vulnerable groups, single parent family.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to selectively reflect the concerns in the literature regarding the quality of life in single-parent families and the social problems faced by this vulnerable group. Genoveca (2018) stresses the importance of deepening and studying the topic of single-parent families, which over time have faced numerous social problems and risk situations, leading to increased vulnerability of its members. Schalock (2004) states that over the past two decades, the concept of quality of life has become a central focus of research.

As a fundamental notion in the field of sociology quality of life was first mentioned in 1950 and refers to the well-being and happiness of the individual (European Environment Agency, 2009). In the 1970s, the topic of quality of life was first addressed at a theoretical level in the United States of America and later in numerous scientific articles that focus on the importance of the quality of life of individuals in a society (Constantinescu, 2002). The concept of quality of life emerged in the USA, mainly as a result of population unrest and the conclusion that economic prosperity is not sufficient to describe quality of life. Therefore, the well-being of citizens is given by several factors that influence the level of quality of life. In addition to the economic situation, it is also necessary to know the degree of satisfaction of individuals, access to social services, education, health, the environment in which they live, income levels and living conditions.

### 2. QUALITY OF LIFE OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

Boboc et al. (2019) suggest that interest in the concept of quality of life and its study is growing, amid the development of technology and science, and the multidimensional nature reflected by it allows the analysis of positive and negative aspects of the lives of individuals. Thus, the analysis of quality

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of life is a current, complex and multidisciplinary concept, which over time has seen different approaches and definitions found in the literature but also an evolution through research that examines the notion of quality of life. At the same time, in the last three decades, there has been a significant concern on the part of the European Union to analyse the concept of quality of life, which places this notion at the centre of research (Mărginean, 2004).

In contemporary society, the family is an essential institution and the numerous transformations that have taken place over time have made the vulnerability of the family and the risks to which it is subject a subject of concern and a topic that needs to be addressed and studied in depth (Genoveca, 2018). Therefore, the challenges in today's society such as the increased level of poverty, limited income, high expenses, the impossibility of meeting basic needs and ensuring a decent living, hinder the normal functioning of the family and affect the lives of its members both psychologically and professionally and socially. As a result, the low quality of life and the emergence of difficulties within families have led to their marginalisation and to an increase in the number of people belonging to vulnerable groups.

The low standard of living and the lack of understanding of the basic conditions and needs of the individual leads to their social exclusion and the emergence of vulnerable groups (Popescu, 2019). As a result, disadvantaged people are socially and professionally isolated, have limited access to education, health or social services and are vulnerable to problems and risks that may arise throughout their lives. Therefore, factors such as the level of education, the extent to which disadvantaged people have access to health services, household income, perceived satisfaction or the way an individual perceives their life in relation to their own experiences contribute to their quality of life. Currently, lone parents are one of the most vulnerable groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2019).

In the literature, there are several views on the concept of quality of life. The concept of quality of life can be approached as: a theoretical concept, an essential objective to be achieved through the development of programs and policies that contribute to the development of the country but also a criterion that measures the degree of development and social satisfaction based on a series of subjective indicators of the general experience of the components of life (Zamfir, 2017). Thus, the concept of quality of life is a multidimensional concept that covers several aspects of an individual's life and contributes to identifying the standard of living and degree of satisfaction felt in a society. Therefore, factors such as the economic situation, the level of education, the degree of involvement of public authorities in the development of society, the living conditions of citizens, have a major impact on people's quality of life.

Ims and Jakobsen (2017) argue that quality of life is an important concept in psychology, philosophy and economics that depends on three dimensions, inner peace, social peace and peace with the environment and stress the importance of this concept in the light of the fact that since ancient times, people have wanted to live a good life and achieve happiness. Therefore, living conditions and a high quality of life contribute to the harmony of citizens with their environment and their integration into the society in which they live. As a result, the quality of society has a key role to play in people's happiness and satisfaction.

An important perspective on the concept of quality of life has been reflected by Allardt (1993), who argues that there is a need for an understanding of the basic needs and conditions without which people cannot exist in society, these needs relate to material conditions (financial resources, education, health, working conditions), social need which includes social relationships, group of friends, relationships with family and the need to be integrated into society. Put more clearly, understanding people's needs and creating a favourable environment in which they can develop and feel integrated contributes to people's well-being and to improving their quality of life. The quality of life theme involves knowledge and analysis of a number of key areas, including the well-being of individuals, levels of education, access to health and social services, the quality of society and social exclusion or inclusion (Mărginean, 2004). It is therefore very important to know these key areas

concerning the quality of life of people in a society in order to identify the social problems they face and the factors that contribute to the social exclusion of vulnerable groups.

Constanza et al. (2008) define the concept of quality of life as the degree to which an individual's objective needs are met in relation to the individual's subjective, individual perception of well-being. Subjective perception refers to people's satisfaction with living conditions, the level of happiness they feel, while objective perception refers to human needs for security, social integration, the need for food, water, sleep, the need for esteem or the need for socialisation (Constanza et al., 2008). Thus, there is a close link between the needs people have and how they feel about the fulfilment of these needs and their satisfaction. A similar view is taken by the authors who argue that subjective indicators are strongly dependent on objective situations and underline the multidisciplinary nature of the concept of quality of life which refers to several aspects: living conditions, individual well-being, job satisfaction, work-life balance and access to services.

The concept of 'quality of life of the population' defines human existence and society as a whole. Mărginean (2019) refers to the way individuals live together and emphasizes its scientific importance. We are of the opinion that human existence is influenced by factors that indicate the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the level of quality of life, such as access to health services, the level of education, the financial resources existing in the family, the political system or the way in which public authorities manage through effective and sustainable policies and programs to improve the lives of citizens and ensure their social inclusion.

Another concept discussed in the literature refers to vulnerable groups and how the level of well-being of citizens and the degree to which their needs are met influence their membership of these groups. Popescu (2019) considers that the term vulnerable group refers to those people who are marginalized, at risk and socially and financially disadvantaged, vulnerability reflects the weakness, defenselessness and lack of means felt by people belonging to these groups. Vulnerable groups are therefore people who are socially excluded, who are not supported by public authorities or the community, who are at risk of poverty because of their difficult financial situation and poor living conditions. Consequently, factors such as the level of education, the extent to which disadvantaged people have access to health services, household income, perceived satisfaction or the way an individual perceives their life and standard of living contribute to their quality of life.

The European Parliament (2016) has published an information note on the issue of vulnerable groups that are on the rise due to poverty and social problems they face, but also to situations of inequality and social marginalisation, vulnerable groups being people who are in situations of poverty and social exclusion caused by physical disabilities, ethnic origins, increased number of single-parent families, limited or no financial resources. Of course, society's perception of vulnerable groups can also be influenced by factors other than those mentioned above, leading to a steady increase in the number of people who are ignored and marginalised both by the community in which they live and by the competent authorities who have to address the problem. As a result of society's prejudices and lack of interest in these groups, many people live in inadequate conditions, develop traumas that affect them both psychologically and socially, fail to develop and have equal access to basic public services (health, education, water and electricity infrastructure).

### **3. PARTICULARITIES OF QUALITY OF LIFE WITHIN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES**

Single-parent families are one of the most vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion and risk due to high levels of poverty and living conditions, as these vulnerable groups are the result of divorce between parents, death or absence of one parent (European Commission, 2019). The quality of life of single-parent families is affected by the social problems they face and affects the normal functioning of the family, which is the basic pillar in a society and is responsible for the upbringing and development of future generations.

Genoveca (2018) highlights the social problems faced by single-parent families and the fact that parents who are exposed to risk situations and poverty struggle to provide basic financial resources,

such as expenses for education, health, provision of vital food, which hinders the normal development of the family, and highlights the concept of poverty as a factor that affects the well-being of families and leads to social marginalization, the emergence of difficulties and the risk that future generations will take over the problems currently faced by single-parent families. In other words, the way in which children develop and grow up, and the living conditions they experience, can have negative effects in the future, both psychologically, socially and individually, as they risk reliving their parents' experience and further contributing to the increase in the number of people from vulnerable groups in need of help.

Voinea (2005) argues that single-parent families face a number of problems related both to the interaction between family and society and to the relationships within the family, the single parent has too much responsibility and the public authorities do not provide enough support to this vulnerable group. This is why the situation of single-parent families is often made more difficult because of a lack of support and society's preconceptions about how they live. Stereotypes and social stigmas continue to have a great influence on society's perception of single mothers and single parent families in general (Scott et al., 2019). In other words, the perceptions of people around them and fixed preconceptions affect the lives of single parent families and contribute to their marginalisation as well as the development of moral trauma caused by society's negative view and indifference to the problems faced by the vulnerable group.

Social exclusion is the limitation of people's access to vital public services, such as health, education, social services, electricity infrastructure or water services, and the inequality of opportunities and chances that leads to the impossibility of ensuring a decent standard of living (Day, 2021). Therefore, central and local public authorities must guarantee the inclusion of single-parent families and ensure equal opportunities and fair access to public services for people belonging to this vulnerable group as well as for people belonging to other groups at risk or facing social marginalisation.

There are several studies in the literature that address the issue of vulnerable groups, and in particular single-parent families, but also the difficulties faced by these people at risk and the factors that contribute to their quality of life.

The study conducted by Arpintie (2017) analyses the perception of the Romanian population and representatives of social economy structures regarding the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. We believe that it is very important to know how financial resources have been managed because inefficient management of European funds and poor management can affect the successful implementation of projects aimed at integrating vulnerable groups into society. At the same time, the participatory dimension of citizens and their consultation on the decisions and projects implemented plays a key role in prioritising resources and the problems faced by the community.

To collect data, the researcher conducted a survey whose main objective was to analyse the participatory dimension of citizens and how they perceive the implementation of projects financed by European funds, as well as the opinion of the direct beneficiaries involved in these programmes. The survey was carried out at national level and the answers were collected from representatives of social enterprises or people working in the social economy. Arpintie (2017) identified that the Romanian population is reluctant when it comes to implementing programmes for vulnerable groups and prefers that the funds allocated to the implementation of projects contribute to the development and modernisation of transport infrastructure, the rural environment, the improvement of the education system or vocational training and qualification of the workforce. The survey results showed that respondents supporting disadvantaged groups considered intervention for abandoned/institutionalised children or disabled people as essential and were less supportive of single-parent families or families with many children. The adult population in Romania is also more supportive of investment projects in areas such as education or transport infrastructure, compared to projects to support vulnerable groups, which are considered less important. In addition, representatives of social economy structures identified poverty as the main cause of social exclusion.

Stănescu and Dumitru (2017) aim to provide an overview of the social problems faced by Romania, the social inequality and social exclusion of vulnerable groups, as well as the causes of risk factors

affecting the quality of life. We believe that it is important to create a complex and clear vision of the quality of life of Romanian citizens and to carry out specialised research to help identify the main vulnerable groups and the problems they face, as well as to formulate sustainable and effective solutions to improve the lives of people at risk and reduce the impact of factors affecting the development of socially marginalised people.

The data collected in this paper comes from the distribution of a representative sample survey and face-to-face interviews conducted in the subjects' homes. The research results show that, in addition to meeting the basic needs that ensure a decent living, there are also 'more sophisticated' standards and needs such as the purchase of a car or high-performance devices (computer, laptop, tablet). Moreover, failure to meet basic needs increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Providing the necessities for a decent living therefore contributes to the well-being of individuals and to a better quality of life.

Zhou and Taylor (2022) highlights the importance of emotional support and support that family and friends provide to single mothers who are facing social and emotional problems caused by single parenthood. The authors also compare the support provided by family and friends for single mothers and draw attention to the need to study the topic of single-parent families in the context of the increasing number of single parents raising their children. The support provided by family, friends and society therefore makes a vital contribution to the inclusion of single mothers both socially and professionally, helping them to overcome the difficult situations they face and the emotional problems caused by high levels of stress, which can have a negative impact on their children's upbringing and the normal development and functioning of the family.

The survey method was used to collect the data, which was distributed online and administered to a sample of 200 single mothers in the US state of Indiana. In order to participate in the survey, single mothers must meet certain eligibility requirements, e.g. they must not live with a partner and have a child under 18 years of age in their care. The research results show that single mothers who have higher incomes, who have not experienced high impact childhood problems or trauma, and who have higher education, have a higher level of support from family and friends compared to single mothers who have experienced high impact emotional trauma during childhood and who are facing financial problems or have not been able to complete their education. The study's findings highlight the need for family and friends to be involved in the lives of single mothers and that their moral support helps to improve the health of women raising their children alone and to prevent the risk of depression as a result of the social problems faced by single parents. Therefore, the involvement of close persons in the lives of single-parent families at risk is important for the social inclusion of people belonging to these families and contributes to reducing their feelings of stress, insecurity and marginalisation.

One of the future challenges highlights that parents who are exposed to situations of risk and poverty or who struggle to provide basic financial resources, such as spending on education or providing basic food, hinder the normal development of the family and lead to the risk that future generations will take over the problems faced by the single parent family today (Genoveca, 2018). Therefore, the living conditions in which they live, access to education and the level of quality of life, can influence the personal and moral development and evolution of children who come from single-parent families, they run the risk of contributing in the future to the increase in the number of people who belong to vulnerable groups that need support from society and central and local authorities but also the risk of their social exclusion.

Scott et al. (2019) conclude that women raising their children alone do not receive emotional support from their community and are less accepted by society compared to married women, and that social stereotypes and stigmas continue to have a strong influence on society's perception of single mothers and single-parent families in general, single mothers are seen as unable to provide emotional and financial support to their children. Therefore, the perception of people around them and the preconceptions they hold affect the lives of lone parents and contribute to their marginalisation as well as to the development of moral trauma caused by society's negative view and indifference to the problems faced by this vulnerable group. Therefore, although contemporary society promotes

equality, fair access of people from groups at risk to vital public services (education, health, water supply) and social inclusion, stereotypes and negative views about single-parent families continue to exist in the community and to have negative effects on the lives of those who belong to this group.

An interesting perspective comes from the pandemic period and belongs to Epting (2021), who suggests that the number of socially isolated people continues to grow and social marginalisation affects both the normal functioning of life of vulnerable groups and mental health, and the solution to this problem affecting an increasing number of people is the introduction of technologies by creating a virtual world and a virtual city in which disadvantaged groups can be included in society and improve living conditions and the quality of people's lives. Vulnerable groups are therefore able to live in the virtual environment, socialise and feel included in society. However, we believe that relating to people and feeling part of society cannot be replaced by the virtual environment and that social marginalisation cannot be compensated by living in a virtual reality.

Another trend in connection with the quality of life in single-parent families is the increase in the incidence of bullying, children who are part of dysfunctional families and who have developed certain traumas in childhood are at risk of developing aggressive behavior caused by social isolation and family role models, and on the other hand, they are at risk of being bullied due to insecurities and lack of defensive capacity (Vlazan and Pinteau, 2021). Family life and the way in which children develop in single-parent families contribute to the emergence of bullying, and they risk becoming bullies or becoming victims of bullying due to poor living conditions, low education levels or poverty, and are marginalised by society.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Worldwide, single-parent families consisting of single mothers or fathers are an increasingly vulnerable group (Chiu et al., 2018). The literature highlights the need to analyse the concept of quality of life and the fact that the well-being of citizens is determined by several factors. Due to the social problems they face and the risk situations, over time, the level of vulnerability of the single parent family has increased and has become a topic that needs to be further studied and researched (Genoveca, 2018). In addition, in the literature (Arpintie, 2017; Stănescu & Dumitru, 2017; Scott et al., 2019; Zhou & Taylor, 2022) it has been found that single-parent families face risk situations and social inequalities due to their difficult financial situation, level of poverty, lack of access to education, health and basic services, are marginalized and excluded, lack moral support from friends, family or the community they live in and are unable to ensure a decent standard of living.

The quality of life of single-parent families is affected by the social problems they face and affects the normal functioning of the family and the development of future generations. In conclusion, it is necessary to know the factors affecting the quality of life of single-parent families, the impact of factors affecting the quality of life on the development of this vulnerable group, and the solution to the social problems they face. The interest in the concept of quality of life and its research is growing, amidst the continuous development of technology and science, this issue being the focus of interest for researchers in the field who try to capture the concept of quality of life both from a subjective and objective perspective but also at an individual or collective level (Boboc et al., 2019). Therefore, the concept of quality of life looks at people's financial situation, level of education, access to health services, living conditions, but also at individuals' views on their own well-being, their satisfaction with living conditions, their need for social integration and their membership of a social group.

Future research should focus on exploring the perceptions of communities that are part of different cultures about single parents raising their children alone and on gathering information about changes in attitudes towards single parent families (Scott et al., 2019). Finally, public institutions at local and central level must be involved in identifying the people belonging to single-parent families and the situations and problems faced by their members, to ascertain the causes of the deficiencies affecting the standard of living and to develop effective solutions to increase and improve the quality of life of single parents.

It is also important that single-parent families receive support from society and from local and central public authorities to enable them to integrate socially and professionally and to ensure a decent standard of living. Public authorities at local and central level must focus on identifying and tackling the problems faced by lone parents in order to combat their marginalisation and social exclusion and to support improvements in their quality of life and living conditions. In addition to this, local and central public institutions can collaborate with and support social enterprises in order to integrate the vulnerable group into the labour market and to qualify people belonging to single-parent families.

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