

KWDI Issue Paper

Research Title: Suggestions for Reducing Multidimensional Poverty and Gender Gaps among Single-Parent Families

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The Multidimensional Poverty Status and Response Measures of Single-Parent Families

Abstract

- ◆ The difficulty faced by single-parent families exists across various dimensions; however, despite this, the approach to addressing poverty in single-parent families has significant limitations and is overly simplistic.
- ◆ Therefore, this study examines the multifaceted and compounded poverty evident in the lives of single-parent families and explores social policy responses to address these challenges.
- ◆ Using data from the Korea Welfare Panel Study, the results of the comparative analysis between single-parent households and dual-parent households reveal that single-parent households experience more disadvantaged conditions in all indicators compared to dual-parent households. Particularly, the gap in asset poverty was found to be the most severe.
- ◆ Furthermore, to gain a detailed understanding of the experiential realities behind these statistics, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 single-parent household heads. The results of these interviews overwhelmingly supported the numerical findings. Particularly, it was observed that escaping income poverty is nearly impossible for those in vulnerable health situations, highlighting the strong interrelatedness of poverty experiences across different dimensions.
- ◆ Based on the results of this study, specific policy recommendations for each of the six dimensions have been presented. Particularly, it is emphasized that these dimensions are not independent but interconnected, and addressing difficulties experienced by single-parent households cannot be achieved by focusing on just one dimension. To overcome this situation, it is proposed that the government first overcome bureaucratic barriers across the authorities and establish a system that provides integrated services to single-parent households comprehensively.

● Single-parent families experience poverty in various domains.

- ▶ Examining the economic challenges based on the 2021 Single-Parent Family Survey by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, the proportion of households receiving government support, such as low-income single-parent family assistance, has been increasing: from 30.4% in 2012 to 41.5% in 2015, 46.0% in 2018, and 54.4% in 2021. Additionally, the percentage of recipients of the National Basic Livelihood Security System has seen a significant increase, rising from 12.2% in 2012 to 13.5% in 2015, 32.8% in 2018, and 45.8% in 2021 (Bae et al., 2021: 57, 474). The monthly average income of single-parent households is only slightly above half of the average for dual-parent households, standing at 245.3 thousand won compared to the 416.9 thousand won average for dual-parent households (Statistics Korea, 2021).

● On the other hand, a more comprehensive understanding is required regarding the impoverished situation of single-parent households. Economic poverty can be aggravated, overlapped, and sustained by deprivation in non-economic areas. Therefore, it is necessary to simultaneously consider multiple factors (Oh et al., 2020).

- ▶ For instance, unlike dual-parent households, the head of a single-parent household has to shoulder the responsibilities typically handled by two adults, resulting in a constant struggle being time-poor. This time poverty is exacerbated, especially when the children are younger, and it becomes a crucial factor limiting the labor force participation of single-parent household heads (Noh and Kim, 2010).
- ▶ In the end, single-parent household heads who do not secure decent job or receive adequate education and training may find themselves deprived of opportunities to escape poverty. Moreover, in a situation where maintaining a long-term career in a decent job is not easily achievable, single-parent households without the capacity to accumulate assets for the future may face harder challenges in securing stable housing.

● In this way, the disadvantaged socioeconomic status of single-parent households compared to dual-parent households manifests itself in various areas. However, previous studies focus on assessing the poverty of single-parent households with a single-dimensional approach.

- ▶ Since research focusing on a certain single dimension makes it difficult to understand the interaction of disparities across policy areas, discussions about integrated responses become impossible.
- ▶ Therefore, it is necessary to examine multidimensional poverty so as to better understand the status and structure of overlapping and compounded poverty in the lives of single-parent families and explore social policy responses to address these challenges.

Analysis results

Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families

- This study compared the poverty of single-parent households with two-parent households (male single-income households and dual-income households) in multiple dimensions using the data from the Korea Welfare Panel Study. In this context, the dimensions were set as income, assets, housing, labor, and health, with each representing income poverty, asset poverty, excessive housing burden, unemployment, and health deprivation, respectively, as key poverty indicators.
- As of 2020, the poverty of single-parent households was more severe than that of two-parent households in all five dimensions. In particular, among the five dimensions, asset poverty was found to be the most severe deprivation.
 - ▶ However, asset poverty was severe not only for single-parent households but also for dual-parent households. It can be explained that these groups are all households raising children, and the household heads are generally at a young age before they have formed sufficient assets. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note the significant disparity in asset poverty between single-parent and dual-parent households. Single-parent households face high levels of poverty in labor and income dimensions as well, which contrasts with the dual-parent households showing a very favorable situation in these dimensions.
 - ▶ Compared to the early analysis period in 2011, multidimensional poverty among single-parent households appears to have improved in 2020. This can be observed from the radar chart(Figure1) that shows the decrease in multidimensional poverty of single-parent households. Most notably, there is a noticeable improvement in income and health dimensions among five dimensions. However, in the labor dimension, poverty levels have increased. Further investigation is needed through subsequent studies to examine this phenomenon in detail.

<Figure 1> Comparison of Multidimensional Poverty between Single-Parent and Dual-Parent Households



Note: Income represents income poverty, assets denote asset poverty, housing refers to excessive housing burden, labor indicates unemployment, and health represents the rate of health deprivation.

Source: Reanalysis of original data from the Korea Welfare Panel Study waves 7-16.

● Next, using the 2019 Time Use Survey data (Statistics Korea) to comprehend time poverty, we analyzed the subjective perceptions of leisure time, time poverty, and time pressure among single-parent households, comparing them with male single-income households and dual-income households. The following findings were identified.

- ▶ Firstly, leisure time for households with children tends to be generally low compared to the overall population, and the rate of time poverty is notably high. In all groups, the age of the child was the most crucial factor influencing leisure time, time poverty, and the perception of time pressure. As the child's age is lower, leisure time available decreases, the risk of time poverty significantly increases, and awareness of time pressure increases. These trends indicate that our society does not provide sufficient temporal flexibility needed for raising children.
- ▶ Despite the implementation of the 52-hour workweek limit and significant expansions in measures such as maternity leave, spouse maternity leave, parental leave, and reduced working hours during childcare, along with considerable progress in universalizing caregiving services through free childcare, the presence of young children remains the most decisive factor influencing time poverty. This highlights the need for active responses to the diminished quality of life in households with young children by addressing the pervasive issue of long working hours in Korean society, increasing the use of parental leaves at the early stage of newborn children, and expanding caregiving services.
- ▶ The age of the child is an important factor determining the time demand in households raising children, but the temporal responses differ based on gender. In the case of men, the levels of leisure time, time poverty, and perception of time shortage based on the age of the child showed a smaller variation than women. Particularly, men did not show significant differences in levels of time poverty and time pressure based on household type.
- ▶ In dual-parent households, there were no statistically significant differences in the levels of men's leisure time, time poverty, and perception of time shortage between male single-income households and dual-income households. Similarly, in single-parent households, most of the analysis results did not reveal significant differences for men. This indicates that men in households with children are not actively participating in childcare and household tasks.
- ▶ In a society where long working hours continue to be a cultural norm, the involvement of men in childcare and household responsibilities may inherently face limitations. Alongside overall reductions in working hours, there is a continual need to actively pursue policy measures that promote men's participation in childcare.

● On the other hand, this study did not find a clear relationship between income poverty and time poverty.

- ▶ Regarding time pressure and time poverty, household income variables did not show significant differences for the most part. It was observed that household income had an impact on some variables (men's probability of time poverty, women's perception of time shortage) only when the household income was in the highest income bracket.
- ▶ These results suggest that income poverty and time poverty are distinct dimensions of quality of life issues, each requiring separate consideration.
- ▶ Single-parent family support policies are currently centered around the income-poverty stratum. However, the dimension of time use patterns should be integrated, and further policy support is indicated for households experiencing dual poverty, encompassing both income and time poverty.

● Multidimensional Poverty Experience of Single-Parent Households

● In this study, we conducted Focus Group Interviews(FGI) with single-parent household heads to understand the diverse life experiences and policy support experiences that manifest differently based on the various environments of single-parent household heads.

- ▶ The interviewees were male and female single-parent household heads who directly care for their children and have firsthand experience with various policies targeting single-parent families.
 - ▶ We conducted a total of five FGIs, with each group consisting of four or five participants, targeting a total of 25 individuals. Considering the actual distribution of single-parent households and the feasibility of recruiting participants, we divided the groups into four groups of female single-parent household heads and one group of male single-parent household heads. For the female single-parent household head groups, we organized FGIs with groups of participants having children in different age groups—infants/toddlers, elementary school, middle/high school, and college students—ensuring that they could articulate policy and life experiences specific to their children's ages.
- The results of the FGI indicate that the National Basic Livelihood Security System and emergency welfare support serve as a safety net that ensures a certain degree of income for single-parent households.
- ▶ Single parents facing income poverty exert considerable effort to qualify for assistance. Among the interview participants, many recounted instances of involuntary termination of support due to not meeting specific conditions. While striving to maintain eligibility, single-parent household heads also grapple with the fear of potential disqualification and the pressure to sustain their support.

- ▶ While the National Basic Livelihood Security System aims to improve people's living conditions and make them ineligible for livelihood support, such a situation requires significant determination and resolve for single-parent households. This circumstance often compels single-parent household heads to heavily rely on the basic livelihood support system. Consequently, as their children grow into adults, they may become economically more vulnerable.

- **Single-parent household heads strongly recognize the need to build assets, expressing concerns about their post-retirement livelihood and the uncertain future of their children without one parent.**

- ▶ However, asset formation seemed like an insurmountable task to them, creating an overwhelming burden of debt that loomed over their lives until they die.
- ▶ Some single-parent families, despite attempting to build assets through government support programs aimed at assisting low-income individuals without debt, faced disappointment as their aspirations clashed with eligibility requirements for income security programs like basic livelihood support or self-reliant work.

- **Housing holds significant importance for single-parent families as a stable environment as well as a fundamental condition for raising children. However, it remains challenging for them to secure the desired housing environment.**

- ▶ Various types of housing support programs exist, but many single-parent families encounter barriers in meeting deposit requirements or find that the location of rental housing is not suitable for those who must balance child-rearing and work responsibilities alone.
- ▶ Moreover, when their children become adults, they get excluded from housing supporting policies since they are not recognized as 'single-parent' families, even though these adult children may face difficulties in immediately participating in economic activities. In this context, unstable housing can impact both parents and adult children, potentially prolonging the cycle of poverty for everyone involved.

- **On the other hand, single-parent household heads cannot afford to choose job.**

- ▶ The sole criterion for job selection is whether it is possible to achieve a balance between childcare and work. However, in reality, finding a job that supports work-family balance is not easy. One participant mentioned that there is a severe shortage of jobs in our society that support work-family balance, and ultimately, it seems that entrepreneurship is the only alternative for single-parent household heads.
- ▶ Childcare and work are challenging aspects for single-parent household heads to secure both stably, requiring the individual to choose one over the other in the life of a single-parent family. Single-parent household heads regret choosing employment over childcare but find themselves in a situation where they must prioritize employment again, leading to ongoing conflicts in the daily life.

● **The most crucial time for single-parent households is the time dedicated to childcare.**

- ▶ Single working parents find themselves dividing their time between work and childcare, leaving little room to spare. Reflecting on this lifestyle, they consider having personal time for themselves as a luxury.
- ▶ While there are various institutions supporting childcare, they have not been sufficient to fill the gaps in childcare needs. Particularly, with recent challenges such as the shift to online schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limitations on childcare facility access, the difficulties arising from childcare gaps have become more pronounced.

● **The physical and mental health of single-parent household heads appears to be in a very serious condition.**

- ▶ Single parents, responsible for both livelihood and childcare without additional caregiving support, had neither the financial nor temporal flexibility to prioritize their health. For them, it is common to endure illness until it reaches a serious condition before seeking medical attention. In cases requiring surgery, they often hesitate to undergo the procedure as they lack someone to care for their children.
- ▶ In addition to the anxiety about raising children alone, single parents often face emotional difficulties such as depression due to life events like giving birth while unmarried, divorce, and bereavement. Single parents experience burnout while striving to live on their own, and despite their efforts, they feel a sense of self-blame for being an insufficient parent to their children.

● **In summary, the results of the investigation into the experiences of income, assets, housing, labor, time, and health poverty among single-parent households indicate that poverty in each dimension does not occur independently but is interconnected.**

- ▶ For instance, escaping from income poverty is not feasible when health is not in good condition. For single parents without other resources, childcare and a decent job are perceived as separate dimensions that are incompatible.
- ▶ They qualify for the benefits of government policies supporting asset formation, but worry about the risk of losing eligibility to other government support and consequently give them up. This is likely to be linked to future poverty.
- ▶ The poverty in each dimension is strongly interconnected, posing complex challenges in the lives of single-parent families.

Income Poverty

Expansion of eligibility criteria and the multi-layered support system for single-parent family support programs

- ▶ The current method of providing support, using an all-or-nothing approach through a single low-income criterion for single-parent families, has limitations in that it may keep a considerable number of families in poverty. It may lead to the prolonged nature and intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Applying a grace period before discontinuing welfare benefits

- ▶ Disqualification is a significant and challenging issue for single-parent families. Instead of immediately terminating all welfare benefits, such as livelihood assistance, medical aid, housing support, education assistance, and child-rearing allowances, it is necessary to establish a certain grace period to alleviate anxiety and facilitate adaptation even after disqualification.
- ▶ Independence without such support for single parents who have relied on public assistance income for an extended period is undoubtedly a significant and intimidating challenge. Rather than facing sudden changes, it is necessary to provide an opportunity for them to assess whether they can handle disqualification themselves and escape from lifelong poverty by creating a transitional period for a certain period.
- ▶ In the midst of raising children, providing a period where they can seek employment on their own or adjust working hours to find a balance is essential. This ensures a safety net for minimal care from the child's perspective.

Asset Poverty

Creating alternatives for single-parent households left in institutional blind spots

- ▶ For single-parent families, it was found that asset formation seems like a distant goal, and a lifelong debt burden is overwhelming their lives.
- ▶ To participate in asset formation programs targeting low-income individuals, it is required that a household member without credit issues applies. However, if the heads of a single-parent household, who is the only adult in the household, are in credit delinquency, it is not possible for them to even apply for the asset formation programs.
- ▶ If it were a two-parent household, even if one person is in a credit-deficient situation, another adult could apply for support. However, in the case of a single-parent household, lacking another adult, they may fall into institutional blind spots. Therefore, developing alternative solutions is necessary.

Creating stable living conditions for single-parent household heads

- ▶ As another issue, single-parent household heads have to consider whether forming assets at this point is a better choice.
- ▶ Based on the in-depth interview results, it was observed that some single-parent household heads felt unable to cope with the difficulties caused by disqualification. Some of them took covert measures to conceal or transfer their assets, such as through insurance products or placing them in the name of others, to avoid losing eligibility for benefits.
- ▶ To address this paradoxical situation, it is essential to create conditions that allow for a stable life even after they become disqualified from receiving support, before promoting asset formation support programs.

Housing Poverty

Improvements in age criteria for housing support programs for single parents and their children

- ▶ There are various housing support programs, including public rental housing, to ensure the housing stability of single parents. However, even with these support programs, the reality was that it was challenging to lead a stable life in housing, especially when securing a minimum deposit was difficult. Single parents who benefited from private organizations' sponsored deposit support programs could use the deposit as seed money to enter a critical juncture in achieving housing stability. However, those who did not have such support continued to live with the burden of housing-related expenses, such as monthly rent.
- ▶ In order to realize the practical benefits of housing support programs, it is necessary to introduce programs that can assist with the deposit. Additionally, special supply criteria, originally designed for newlyweds, were applied to single-parent families. Reflecting a restriction period of seven years after marriage registration, which was initially established for newlyweds, the criterion specifies that the age of a single parent's child should be six or below.
- ▶ Considering that the average age of single parents is in their 40s, and a majority of their children are in middle or high school, the policy of offering special housing supply to single parents with children aged six or below appears disconnected from the reality. There is a need to establish new criteria that take into account the average age of single parents and the age of their children to enhance the effectiveness of the support system.

Labor Poverty

Strengthening the employment allowance for single-parent household heads

- ▶ In order to alleviate labor poverty among single-parent household heads, it should be considered to strengthen job retention allowances. From the perspective of a single-parent household head, the incentive to actively seek employment is not significant, even if it means compromising the care of their children and their own health. Remaining unemployed and receiving various welfare benefits is considered a safer and more reliable option.
- ▶ However, due to a lack of work experience, there is a risk that even after the children have grown, individuals may struggle to find employment, leading to long-term poverty and the possibility of transitioning into elderly impoverished households. Despite the difficulty of maintaining a job, individuals striving to build their own careers should be provided with additional benefits, such as job retention incentives, recognizing their efforts.

● Time Poverty

● Establishment of practical time support system for single-parent household heads

- ▶ The 52-hour workweek limit has been implemented, and various measures have been taken, such as maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, and shorter working hours during child raising. Even though childcare services have made significant progress through the universalization of child care, having a child continues to be the most decisive factor influencing time poverty.
- ▶ This highlights the need to address the pervasive issue of long working hours in Korean society. Simultaneously, efforts should be directed toward increasing the utilization rates of parental leave and time-off systems during the early childcare period. Continued expansion of care services is also essential to proactively respond to the diminished quality of life in households responsible for child rearing.
- ▶ Although a special parental leave system has recently been introduced to ensure time support for single parents, the number of single parents eligible for such benefits (e.g., those working in workplaces with good welfare systems) remains extremely limited. There is a need for a practical time support system that allows single-parent household heads to receive support for leisure and rest periods.

● Health Poverty

● Regular health management and psychological-emotional support programs for single-parent household heads

- ▶ The health status of single parents, who lack personal time, was at a very serious level. Considering the reality of single parents who, due to childcare and economic activities, have little time to care for their own health, the government should actively manage the health of single-parent household heads regularly and provide programs that support their psychological and emotional well-being.
- ▶ Given that health issues are a prevalent difficulty experienced by most single parents, health support should be established as a universal service provided irrespective of income levels.

Multidimensional Poverty

Multidimensional counseling support for single parents

- ▶ Since each dimension is not independent but interconnected, it is difficult to solve the difficulties experienced by single-parent households by focusing only on one dimension. The deficiencies in various dimensions are interconnected, and the economic and non-economic aspects seamlessly overlap without clear boundaries.
- ▶ To address this situation, it is necessary to first overcome the bureaucratic barriers of the government, and a system providing one-stop services to single parents should be established. For instance, concerning psychological support programs, addressing a single aspect has limitations in achieving a comprehensive improvement in the quality of life.
- ▶ Therefore, it is essential to provide support that can provide consultation on various aspects of single-parent situations, including income, assets, housing, time, and health.

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