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# Study on the Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families

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**Study on the Multidimensional Poverty  
of Single-Parent Families**



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# Contents

I. Introduction .....	1
II. Actual Conditions of the Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families .....	3
III. Multidimensional Poverty Experiences of Single-Parent Families ·	6
IV. Conclusions and Policy Suggestions .....	10
1. Poverty on Income .....	10
2. Poverty on Assets .....	12
3. Poverty on Housing .....	14
4. Poverty on Labor .....	15
5. Poverty on Time .....	17
6. Poverty on Health .....	19
7. Multidimensional Poverty .....	19
References .....	21

# Figures

[Figure 1] Comparison of multidimensional poverty between single-parent and dual-parent households .....	4
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# Study on the Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families<sup>1)</sup>

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## I . Introduction

Single-parent families experience poverty in diverse areas. When we examined their difficulties in the economic dimension using the data from the Single-Parent Family Survey of 2021, the proportion of households supported by the government for low-income single-parent families and the like tended to increase, from 30.4% in 2012 to 41.5% in 2015, 46.0% in 2018, and 54.4% in 2021. Also, the proportion of the recipients of national basic livelihood security sharply rose from 12.2% in 2012 to 13.5% in 2015, 32.8% in 2018, and 45.8% in 2021 (Bae, Ho-jung et al., 2021: 57, 474). The average monthly income of single-parent households amounted to approximately 2.45 million won, slightly exceeding the half of that of dual-parent households amounting to approximately 4.17 million won (Statistics Korea, 2021).

With regard to poor situations of single-parent households, it is

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<sup>1)</sup> [Suggestions for Reducing Multidimensional Poverty and Gender Gaps among Single-Parent Families] and [Study on the Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families] are the same study

necessary to understand the complexity of their economic poverty. Because economic poverty can be aggravated, overlapped, and sustained by poverty in non-economic areas, multiple elements need to be considered at the same time to understand the complexity (Oh, Ukchan et al., 2020). For example, heads of single-parent households, unlike heads of dual-parent households, are ceaselessly pressed for time because they have to undertake the role of two adults all alone. Such poverty on time is even more aggravated if their children are younger, and may work as a key factor for restricting them from participating in labor (Noh, Hye-jin and Kim, Kyo-seong, 2010). Eventually, heads of single-parent households may end up being deprived of opportunities to overcome poverty if they cannot have a decent job or proper educational training. Not only this, it may not be easy for them to retain long-term careers in a decent job. Because they cannot afford to increase their assets or to build up assets for the future in this situation, heads of single-parent households would be far from preparing a stable housing.

Such complexity of poor socioeconomic status of single-parent households compared to dual-parent households can be found in diverse areas. However, most previous studies assessed the poverty of single-parent households focusing on a single area only. Because it is difficult to identify the interaction of gaps by policy area based on single dimensional studies, it is impossible to discuss an integrated measure for coping with multidimensional poverty. Therefore, this study aims to identify the actual conditions and structure of complex and overlapped poverty in the lives of single-parent families, and to examine multidimensional poverty in order to seek social policy measures for reducing poverty.

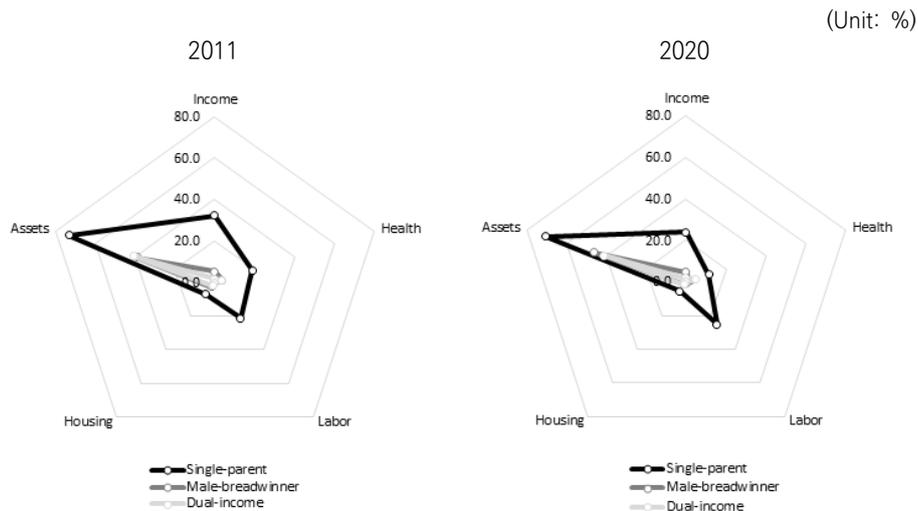
## II . Actual Conditions of the Multidimensional Poverty of Single-Parent Families

First of all, we compared the multidimensional poverty of single-parent households and dual-parent households inclusive of male single-income households and dual-income households using the data from the Korea Welfare Panel Survey. We set the dimensions of poverty in five areas, that is, income, assets, housing, labor, and health, then measured poverty on income, poverty on assets, overburden of housing expenses, unemployment, and ill health as representative indicators for poverty.

As of 2020, the poverty of single-parent households was found to be serious in all the five dimensions compared to that of dual-parent households. Of the five dimensions, poverty on assets was the most serious area of deprivation. However, poverty on assets was serious not only in single-parent households but also in dual-parent households, because these two groups of households belonged to groups of young household heads who raised children and who, in general, could not form enough assets. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there were very wide gaps in poverty on assets between single-parent households and dual-parent households. Single-parent households were at high-level poverty on labor and income as well. In contrast, dual-parent households were in very good condition in the two dimensions.

When compared to 2011 in the initial stage of the analysis, the multidimensional poverty of single-parent households improved. This finding is demonstrated by the radial graph presented below that the area of single-parent households became smaller. Of the five areas, more than anything else, the dimensions of poverty on income and health conspicuously improved. On the other hand, poverty in the dimension

of labor increased. As such, follow-up studies are needed to closely examine this finding.



Note: Income is presented by the proportion of poverty on income, assets by that of poverty on assets, housing by that of overburden of housing expenses, labor by that of unemployment, and health by that of ill health.

Source: Reanalyzed the raw data from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> wave surveys of the Korea Welfare Panel.

[Figure 1] Comparison of multidimensional poverty between single-parent and dual-parent households

Next, to identify poverty on time, we analyzed subjective perceptions of single-parent households regarding leisure time, poverty on time, and time pressure in comparison to male single-income households and dual-income households using the data from the Korean Time Use Survey of 2019. According to the analysis, we found the following: above all, compared to the total population group, the leisure time of households with children was at a low level, and the proportion of poverty on time was very high. In all groups, child/ren's age was the most important factor influencing the perceptions of leisure time, poverty

on time, and time pressure. The younger their children were, i) the less leisure time they had, ii) the more apparent their risk of poverty on time, and iii) the higher the perception of time pressure. These tendencies testify to the fact that Korean society cannot afford to provide enough time to bring up children. The 52-hour workweek policy took effect, and maternity leave, paternity leave, childcare leave, and shorter working hours during child-rearing period greatly expanded to respond to the early stage of raising children. Also, universal care services made considerable progress through free childcare. All the same, having young children in single-parent households had the most decisive impact on poverty on time. This finding shows that while responding to the long working hours widespread in Korean society, it is necessary to raise the use rate of short- and long-term leave systems during the early child-rearing period and to continually expand care services to actively cope with a decrease in the quality of life in child-rearing households.

Though children's age was an important determinant of demand for time in child-rearing households, responses to time were different depending on the gender. Compared to women's, men's perceptions of leisure time, poverty on time, and time pressure did not change much according to children's age. In particular, men did not show much difference in their perception levels of poverty on time and time pressure according to the household types. In male single-income households and dual-income households among the dual-parent households, men did not show a statistically significant difference in their perception levels of leisure time, poverty on time, and time pressure.

Also, men in single-parent households did not show a significant difference in most results of the analysis. This finding evidences that in child-rearing households, men do not actively take part in childcare and

housework. In a society where long hours of work are still considered a cultural norm, men's participation in childcare and domestic work is inevitably limited by default. Therefore, it is necessary to continually seek policy measures to promote men's engagement in childcare while shortening the overall working hours.

In this study, we found that there were no clear relations between poverty on income and poverty on time. Most of household income variables did not have a significant difference in relation to time pressure and poverty on time. Only when household income was in the highest income bracket, household income had an impact on some of the time variables, such as men's probability of being poor on time, and women's perception of time pressure. This finding implies that poverty on income and poverty on time need to be taken into account as the issues of quality of life in different dimensions. At present, support policies for single-parent families are largely focused on low-income households, but time dimension should also be considered together with income dimension. Furthermore, additional policy support is needed for households suffering from the dual poverty of income and time.

### **III. Multidimensional Poverty Experiences of Single-Parent Families**

In this study, we conducted a focus group interview with heads of single-parent households to identify their experiences of different lives and support policies according to the diverse environments. The interviewees included male and female heads of single-parent households who raised children in person and who experienced various kinds of

policies that had been implemented for single-parent households.

The focus group interview was conducted with five groups, each group consisting of four to five persons and all the groups totaling 25 persons. Considering the actual distribution of single-parent households and the possibility of gathering the interview participants, we conducted the FGI by dividing the groups into four groups of female heads of single-parent households and one group of male heads of single-parent households. As for the groups of female heads of single-parent households, we comprised the groups according to their children's age by dividing the children into infants and preschoolers, primary school students, secondary school students, and undergraduates, so that they could specifically and deeply state their experiences of using policies and their life experiences.

According to the FGI, the national basic livelihood security system and the emergency welfare support system functioned as the last safety net to ensure the income for single-parent households. Low-income single parents made several efforts at the same time to be recognized as recipients of the benefits. A majority of the interview participants had the experience of being non-voluntarily excluded from the beneficiary status because they could not meet the eligibility requirements for recipients. While endeavoring not to be deprived of their eligibility, heads of single-parent households were afraid of deprivation of the eligibility and obsessed with maintaining the eligibility. Though the national basic livelihood security system set its policy goal as eventually excluding the recipients from the support system, such exclusion posed big challenges to single-parent households. These situations led heads of single-parent households to rely on the basic livelihood security system, causing them to be more financially vulnerable when their children become adults.

Heads of single-parent households were worried about the uncertain future of their old age and of their children having single parents, and strongly aware of the necessity for forming assets. However, they were overwhelmed with debts that they had to repay until death, let alone build assets. Some single-parent families were debtless, hence attempted to form assets using the government's support systems. But their dreams of building assets were frustrated when such attempt was in conflict with losing the eligibility for the basic livelihood security or income security system including self-support work.

Housing is so significant for single-parent families as a space and basic conditions for raising children in a stable manner. However, it was very difficult for single parents to secure housing conditions as they wanted. Though various types of housing support systems were in effect, they could not benefit from the systems due to the barriers to preparing the deposit for the rental housing. Or, the location of the rental housing was not suited for single parents to work and raise children at the same time all by themselves. Also, once their children became adults, they were no longer single-parent families even if the children had difficulties immediately participating in economic activity. After all, they were excluded from the housing support policies, and unstable housing affected the parents and children alike, leaving both of them in poverty.

Heads of single-parent households could not afford to opt for a job. The single option for them in getting a job was whether the job offered them working conditions for reconciling work and childcare. In reality, however, it was not easy to find a job that supported work-family balance. An interview participant said that because of a gross shortage of jobs supporting work-family balance, heads of single-parent households would have no option but to start a business in the end.

Heads of single-parent households had difficulties simultaneously securing both work and childcare. As these two were in conflict with each other, they had to choose either of the two in the lives of single-parent families. Heads of single-parent households were troubled in every moment of their lives: when they chose a job instead of childcare, then regretted their choice, but despite their regret, they put their priority back on the job. The most important moment for heads of single-parent households is the time they spend taking care of their children. Working heads of single-parent households said in retrospect that they had to split their time between work and childcare to fill in the gap between the two, and that spending time on themselves in that situation was a luxury. Though there were various support centers for childcare, the centers were insufficient to fill in their childcare gaps. When school classes were changed online and care centers were closed to users due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their difficulties arising from the care gaps were even more worsened.

Physical and mental health of heads of single-parent households were in very serious conditions. Single parents could not afford to take care of their health financially and timewise because they had to take responsibilities for livelihood and care all by themselves without any additional caregiver. Single parents had to endure their illness in daily life and went to see a doctor when they were too sick to move at all. They had difficulties readily choosing to have a surgery, even when necessary, because there was no one to look after their children. Besides the anxieties about bringing up children alone, single parents were prone to fall into a depression or suffer other emotional difficulties due to the events in their life history of childbirth, divorce, and bereavement in unmarried status. Single parents got burnout from striving to make a

living by themselves at some times, and felt ashamed of themselves at other times about being unable to supply enough for their children in spite of their hard efforts.

As mentioned in the above, we analyzed the experiences of heads of single-parent households with regard to poverty on income, assets, housing, labor, time, and health. According to the analysis, we found that poverty in each dimension was not experienced separately. For example, single parents could not escape from poverty on income when their health was in poor conditions. Also, for single parents without other resources, childcare and a decent job were perceived as incompatible separate realms. Though some single parents were eligible for the benefits of government policies that support asset-building, they gave up on the benefits for fear of the risk of being deprived of the eligibility. This is highly likely to lead them to poverty in the future. As dimensions of poverty are strongly interconnected, poverty in each dimension can bring complicated difficulties to single-parent families in their lives.

## IV. Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

### 1. Poverty on Income

- 1) Expand eligibility requirements of the single-parent family support system and diversify the tiers of the support system

According to the analysis of the actual conditions of poverty on income of single-parent households, their disposable income was found to be very low compared to that of dual-parent households. Compared particularly to male single-income households among dual-parent

households, single-parent households were by far more exposed to time pressure and poverty on time. Considering this, the overall low-income of single-parent households proves that they are very vulnerable to the dual poverty of income and time. In this situation of dual poverty, it is very difficult to accumulate resources to overcome the beneficiary status of support policies. In reality, a considerable number of single-parent households were found to have maintained a minimum standard for living while retaining the beneficiary status of the national basic livelihood security. Supporting low-income single-parent families in the manner of “all or nothing” through uniform support standards like now has the limitation of leaving a good number of single-parent families in poor situations, causing them to remain in long-term poverty or to pass down poverty to their children. Therefore, it is necessary to review ways of expanding eligibility requirements of the single-parent family support system and diversifying the tiers of the support system. For example, the income standard for the recipients should be increased to 100% of the median income.

## 2) Set a grace period of overcoming poverty

Single-parent households are prone to suffer from a chronic crisis situation because they face a newly added life task of converting the roles performed by two adults to the roles undertaken by themselves alone. They continually encounter issues of relationships in the process of becoming single parents and also issues of changes in employment to maintain their livelihoods. The institutionalized social system based on dual-parent households, particularly male single-income households, tended to lead single parents to be situated in a chronic crisis.

As single-parent families are very frequently exposed to a crisis situation, it is necessary to set a grace period when supporting them so that single-parent families can cope with the crisis and changing situations. In particular, it is an important challenging task for single-parent families to depart from the beneficiary status of the national basic livelihood security. Even if they are excluded from the basic livelihood security system, it is necessary to give them a grace period to some extent to alleviate their anxieties and to adjust to the non-beneficiary status, rather than immediately discontinuing all welfare benefits, including the livelihood security, healthcare, housing, education, and childcare benefits. For single parents who have relied on public transfer income for a long time, standing on their own feet without such support would be a fearful event, posing big challenges to them. As such, it is necessary to provide them with opportunities to see if they can in person undertake the non-recipient situations and escape from lifetime poverty by preparing a transitional stage for them for a while rather than having them face sudden changes. It is also necessary to prepare a safeguard that can ensure a minimum care on the part of children by providing single parents with some time to seek a job for themselves or to strike a balance by adjusting working hours in a situation where they raise children.

## **2. Poverty on Assets**

- 1) Prepare alternative measures for credit delinquent single-parent families

For single-parent families, asset building may appear a far-off goal. Much less building assets, they were found to have been overwhelmed

with debts throughout their lives. Though there is no asset-building support system for single parents only, low-income single parents can participate in asset building programs for groups in low-income brackets offered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. To participate in the asset building programs, household members who are not credit delinquent can apply for the programs. However, if heads of single-parent households as adults in the households are in default due to nonpayment of debt, they cannot even apply for the programs. If they were heads of dual-parent households, another adult of the heads of the households could apply even if one parent was delinquent. However, because this is not the case with single-parent households, it is necessary to prepare alternative measures for preventing delinquent single-parent households from being left out of the institutional support.

- 2) Prevent the assets of single-parent households from going underground due to conflict with the national basic livelihood security system

Another issue in point was that heads of single-parent households were in distress over whether it was a better option to build assets at the present. If they built assets and exceeded the eligibility requirements, they faced the risk of losing the status of receiving the security benefits. In other words, their asset-building brought a logical conflict in the income security system. According to the in-depth interview, heads of single-parent households had the desire of accumulating assets to prepare for emergencies and security of their lives in later years. However, they were diffident in undertaking the difficulties caused by the deprivation of the beneficiary status. In some cases, heads of single-parent households transferred their assets to some insurance products or

disguised their assets in another person's name for fear of such deprivation. To resolve this paradoxical situation of their assets going underground to retain their status, priority should be given to prepare conditions for single-parent households to make stable livelihoods even if they escape from the beneficiary status before promoting the use of the asset building support programs.

### 3. Poverty on Housing

#### 1) Prepare a deposit support system for single-parent families

Housing conditions are essential elements for single parents to raise children and lead a stable life. Nevertheless, according to the results of the survey, not a few single parents lived in spaces or areas unsuitable for bringing up children. Also, compared to dual-parent households, single-parent households had a fairly heavy burden of housing expenses. While the proportion of non-house ownership was 35.0% for male single-income households and 32.4% for dual-income households, the proportion for single-parent households was 70.4%, approximately twice higher than that of the former groups.

There were various housing support projects, including public rental housing for the housing security of single parents. However, in reality, there were too high walls for them to live in secure housing through the support projects because they were in difficult situations to prepare the minimum amount of deposit for the rental housing. Some single parents benefited from the deposit support system offered by private organizations, and capitalizing on the deposit as seed money, they could cross the threshold to live in stable housing. On the other hand, other single parents still could not reduce the burden of housing expenses,

including monthly rent. For the practical use of the housing support system, it is necessary to introduce programs that can support the deposit for rental housing.

- 2) Raise the effectiveness of the housing support system by easing the standard for child's age in single-parent families

Standards for special supply housing subscription for the newly-wed apply with necessary modifications to single-parent households. Borrowed from the standard for the newly-wed that imposed the restriction of seven years after their marriage report, a standard for single parents required that their child/ren should be six years old or below. However, the special subscription policy for single parents with six-year-old or younger children turned out to be far removed from the realities in which single parents were in their 40s on average and most of their children were secondary school students. Considering the average age of single parents and their children's age, it is necessary to establish a new standard to enhance the effectiveness of the housing support system.

#### 4. Poverty on Labor

- 1) Form an environment where the heads of single-parent households can balance their work and life

The self-support work or national employment support system can give an opportunity to single parents who are not employed yet or who are preparing to get a job. However, the self-support work had the limitation of working three years at the longest, and when the recipients of the system changed their jobs later on, their previous self-support work was

not recognized as work experience. Also, some single parents had the opinion that self-support work was of no great help for them because the character of the work was not that of skills required in the labor market. Other single parents who had participated in the self-support projects answered that they would no longer use the self-support work system because they were personally ignored. The national employment support system also had the limitation that the use of the system did not lead them to actually get employed. Therefore, complementary measures for the employment support programs and self-support work projects should be prepared to suit the situations of heads of single-parent households. It is also necessary to promote the active use of the support system for single parents to start a business, and to create an environment where single parents with children can balance their work and life.

2) Offer higher incentives for retaining employment of heads of single-parent households and shorten their working hours

As mid- to long-term policy improvement suggestions, it is necessary to review offering higher incentives for retaining employment. On the part of heads of single-parent households, they had no big incentives to look for jobs to the extent of doing harm to their own health and childcare. Receiving welfare benefits while remaining jobless would be a safe and sure way for them to make a living. However, they have the risk of remaining poor in the long term and in old age as well when they cannot get a job due to a lack of work experience even after their children grow up. Actually, from the in-depth interview, we found a number of cases who made efforts to retain the beneficiary status while their children were growing. More benefits, including incentives for retaining employment, should be given to those who exerted efforts to

build their career for themselves despite their circumstances where it was not easy to retain their jobs.

In the longer term, the overall direction of Korean society should move toward shortening working hours. Also, even if its people work shorter hours to balance work and life, they should be ensured of proper income. There should also be more part-time quality jobs that can be recognized as their career.

## 5. Poverty on Time

- 1) Resolve the problem of working long hours and promote the active use of the leave system during the early child-rearing period

According to the analysis of poverty on time, the proportion of poverty on time of households with children was very high compared to other groups. Of the households, women in dual-income households and single-parent households were most pressed for time, and their risk of poverty on time was highest. The in-depth interview also showed that no consideration was given to leisure time for heads of single-parent households in many cases. Leisure time was a luxury to them as their days were filled with indispensable schedules for making livelihoods and looking after their children. Such lack of relaxation caused them to have physical health issues, including chronic fatigue, and adversely affected their mental health conditions as well, with most single parents showing pent-up anger called *hwa-byung* and feeling of depression. Also, leisure activity needed not just securing time but also financial resources for the leisurely life. Despite the leisure programs freely provided for low-income single-parents, single parents had difficulties securing enough time to search and apply for such programs.

This tendency is testament to the fact that Korean society cannot provide enough free time to raise children. The 52-hour-workweek policy is in effect, and maternity leave, paternity leave, childcare leave, and shorter working hours during child-rearing period have greatly expanded to respond to the early stage of bringing children. Also, universal care services have made significant progress through free childcare. Despite all this, having young children in the households turned out to be the most crucial factor impacting poverty on time. This demonstrates the necessity that Korean society should resolve its widespread problem of working long hours, increase the use rate of short- and long-term leave systems during the early child-rearing period, and continually expand care services to actively respond to a decrease in the quality of life in child-rearing households.

2) Build a new support system for the leisure and relaxation of single-parent household heads

According to the analysis of poverty on time, most household income variables in relation to time pressure and poverty on time did not show significant differences. This implies that poverty on income and poverty on time need to be taken into account separately as issues of quality of life in mutually different dimensions. As the support policies for single-parent families are presently centered on those who are poor on income, the policies should also consider those who are poor on time. Furthermore, additional policy support needs to be provided for single-parent households that suffer from the dual poverty of income and time. It is also urgent to prepare programs that allow single parents to relax even for a short time. In spite of the recent introduction of the special-case childcare leave system to ensure time for single parents, only

a very few single parents, for example, who had a job with a good welfare system, could benefit from the system. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare a realistically feasible support system to provide leisure and rest time for heads of single-parent households.

## 6. Poverty on Health

As mentioned earlier, single parents lacking in personal time were in very serious health conditions. Many of them had physical illness, did not have enough time to see a doctor even if they were sick, and had medical treatment only when they were about to collapse. Some had the opinion that regrettably, the nationally-supported medical checkup covered basic items only. Considering the realities of single parents who cannot afford to look after their own health due to childcare and participation in economic activity, the State should actively provide programs to regularly manage the health of heads of single-parent households and to support their psychological and emotional health. As health issues are difficulties experienced by a majority of single parents, health support needs to be provided as a universal service regardless of income levels.

## 7. Multidimensional Poverty

As found from the in-depth interview with heads of single-parent households, difficulties and problems in diverse dimensions were interconnected. It was clearly revealed that economic and non-economic areas crossed over without any borderline. In a situation of ill health, it was not easy for single parents to escape from poverty on income, and even if they wanted to benefit from asset building programs, they

had to refrain from increasing the recognized amount of income to retain their beneficiary status. As the dimensions of poverty are not independent of each other but connected with each other, the difficulties experienced by single-parent households cannot be resolved by delving deeply into a certain single dimension only. For example, in order for the asset building support system and employment support programs to be successful, they should be improved systematically in connection with the income support system.

To break through this situation, the government should, above all, do away with its segmented administration, and establish a new system to provide one-stop service for single parents. The psychological support system, for example, is limited in improving the quality of their integrated lives if counseling is supported for a certain single area only. Therefore, it is necessary to support counseling on the overall situation of single parents, including their income, assets, housing, labor, time, and health.

Thematic classification of research performance catalogue: low fertility and aging, family and care

Key words: Single-Parent Families, Poverty, Multi-dimension

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