

# Single earners and carers during lockdown: everyday challenges faced by Finnish single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article analyzes the challenges Finnish single mothers experienced in their everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. In studies on challenges to family life during COVID-19 lockdowns, single-parent families remain a largely understudied group.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors apply triple bind theory and ask how did Finnish single mothers manage the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment, and inadequate policies during lockdown in spring 2020? These data come from an online survey including both qualitative and quantitative questions which was conducted between April and May 2020 to gather Finnish families' experiences during lockdown. This analysis is based on the qualitative part of the survey.

**Findings** – This study's results show that lockdown created new inadequacies while also enhancing some old inadequacies in the lives of Finnish single mothers. During lockdown, single mothers faced policy- and resource-disappearances; accordingly, they lost their ability to do paid work normally. Furthermore, these disappearances endangered the well-being of some single mothers and their families.

**Originality/value** – This article contributes to the wider understanding of everyday lives of single mothers and the challenges COVID-19 pandemic created. Moreover, this study provides knowledge on the applicability of the triple bind theory when studying the everyday lives of single mothers.

**Keywords** Single mothers, Triple bind theory, Work, Care, COVID-19 pandemic

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

According to triple bind theory (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018), single parents and their families are disproportionately caught in the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment, and inadequate policies. Thus, single parents face a greater risk of poverty and struggle with combining paid work and care responsibilities. Moreover, the way family policies are organized can either enhance or hinder single parents' and their families' well-being. As the vast majority of single parents in all countries are women, this is also an important issue from the gender equality perspective (e.g. Gornick, 2018; van Lancker, 2018; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018; Zagel and Hübgen, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2020). In Finland, single mothers are a disadvantaged group in many life domains, for instance, they face a higher risk of unemployment and increased poverty rates; they also face more challenges in



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combining work and family life (Chzhen and Bradshaw, 2012; Bradshaw *et al.*, 2018; Moilanen, 2019).

During spring 2020, single-parent families – like all families – faced additional upheaval in their everyday lives as the COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide. In response, countries implemented a variety of restrictions in order to prevent or slow down the spread of the virus. These restrictions have evolved since they were first introduced. In many countries, the most extensive restrictions were employed at the beginning of the pandemic, during spring 2020. The [Finnish Government \(2020\)](#) introduced several policy measures, e.g. school premises were closed in favor of remote teaching. Although preschool childcare remained open, it was recommended that children should be cared for at home if possible. These restrictions were in effect between 18 March and 14 May 2020. Moreover, there was a recommendation to work remotely whenever possible.

Studies examining everyday lives among families with children during the COVID-19 pandemic are gradually emerging. We know that lockdowns during spring 2020 created various challenges to families' everyday lives in many countries. Families with children have been struggling, especially with combining paid work and care responsibilities, given that official childcare has been unavailable, schools have switched to remote teaching, and many parents have shifted to remote working (for Finland, e.g. [Närvi and Lammi-Taskula, 2021](#); [Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta \*et al.\*, 2021](#); [Sutela and Pärnänen, 2021](#); [Mesiäislehto \*et al.\*, 2022](#); for other countries, e.g. [Berghammer, 2022](#); [Chung \*et al.\*, 2021](#); [Craig and Churchill, 2020](#); [Hennekam and Shymko, 2020](#); [Power, 2020](#)). Families from disadvantaged backgrounds often fall behind in many domains of well-being, and the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated these existing inequalities. Thus, the pandemic may represent a double burden for the most vulnerable groups in society, such as single parents.

However, the vast majority of above-mentioned studies have focused on two-parent families; the examination of single-parent families' situations has been more marginal. Studies comparing single- and two-parent families have shown that single parents were hit harder by the pandemic in terms of, for example, economic problems, work-life balance, and loneliness (e.g. [Dromey \*et al.\*, 2020](#); [Langenkamp \*et al.\*, 2022](#); [Yerkes \*et al.\*, 2022](#); [Parolin and Lee, 2022](#)). The preliminary notion that the negative consequences of the pandemic have been concentrated on single-parent families is worrisome, as these families were in many respects already more vulnerable than two-parent families before the pandemic.

Also in Finland, single mothers are among the economically disadvantaged families and child poverty rate is three times higher than child poverty rate in families with two adults ([Hakovirta and Nygård, 2021](#)). Single mothers' employment has remained lower than that of partnered mothers ([Härkönen \*et al.\*, 2023](#)) although employment rate is relatively high, compared to many other countries ([Biegert \*et al.\*, 2022](#)). As single mothers are alone responsible for breadwinning and caring roles, they face challenges to reconcile paid work and family commitments, particularly if they work non-standard hours ([Moilanen, 2019](#)). Thus, the support provided by the welfare state for families with children is not sufficient to protect single mothers from economic and labor market insecurities.

In this study, we aim to fill the research gap concerning single-parent families and the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the challenges Finnish single mothers experienced in their everyday lives during lockdown [1]. We apply triple bind theory (e.g. [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)) and ask: how did Finnish single mothers manage the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment, and inadequate policies during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020? We used an online survey including both qualitative and quantitative questions which was conducted between April and May 2020 to understand Finnish families' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. We focused on information from one open-ended question where respondents were asked to write down their families'

everyday life experiences during the lockdown in terms of challenges and possible solutions. We conducted content analysis on written answers from 41 single mothers.

We employ triple bind theory as a theoretical framework as it addresses the role of changes in single parents' resources, employment conditions, and social policy contexts; all of these aspects were subject to rapid, extensive, and unexpected changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (especially the spring 2020 lockdown). Furthermore, one departure point in triple bind theory is that single parents represent a diverse group of families (see also [Gornick \*et al.\* \(2022\)](#)). [Salin \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) revealed that the pandemic had unequal effects on two-parent families, who had varying means to cope with pandemic-related challenges. It can be assumed that the same applies to single-parent families. Therefore, we see triple bind theory to provide a solid and fruitful theoretical framework for our analysis.

### **Triple bind theory, single mothers, and the COVID-19 pandemic**

The purpose of triple bind theory is to provide deeper understanding on the challenges that single parent families face in their everyday life and more comprehensive understanding of various conditions that are important for single parents' well-being. Triple bind theory stems from the notion that single-parent families face various inadequacies in their lives in terms of resources, employment, and policies. The term inadequate refers to the degree to which the combination of single parents' resources, employment, and policies facilitates their socioeconomic well-being. Hence, the combined effects of this triple bind complicate the lives of single parents. Moreover, single parent households are typically headed by mothers. Women, and mothers in general, are seen to be more disadvantaged than men and fathers in terms of, for example, employment and economic well-being. Therefore, the triple bind is to a great extent gendered (e.g. [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). In Finland, as elsewhere, the vast majority of single parents are women. Moreover, the share of single-mother families among all families with children has been slightly increasing during last few decades (from approximately 12% in 1990 to nearly 20% in 2020). Single-father families comprised around 4% of all families with children in 2020. ([Statistics Finland, 2021](#))

First, single parents' care, income, time, and flexibility resources are limited by the absence of a partner; thus, their financial resources and capacity to make ends meet are more likely to be inadequate ([Härkönen, 2018](#); [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#); [Gornick \*et al.\*, 2022](#)). Inadequate resources are clearly visible in Finland; single mothers face a three times higher poverty risk than families with two adults ([Salmi, 2020](#)). One factor in this increased poverty risk is education; single mothers are likely to have a lower level than parents in couple families ([Härkönen, 2018](#); [Nieuwenhuis, 2020](#)). Second, inadequate employment refers to a wide variety of conditions related to employment inequality and precarious employment conditions, such as the gender pay gap; ability to do paid work; part-time, flexible and non-standard working schedules; and in-work poverty. Hence, single parents – especially mothers – are more often found in precarious employment positions, for example in terms of wages and employment protection; they also have less flexibility to combine work and family responsibilities. ([Zagel and Hübgen, 2018](#); [van Lancker, 2018](#); see also [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). In Finland, although the employment rate of single mothers is rather high (around 76% in 2019), the unemployment rate remains somewhat higher (albeit very close) to that of partnered mothers ([Salmi, 2020](#)).

Third, inadequate policies affect single parents, whose well-being requires significant social policy support. The way social policies are organized in a country can enhance or hinder single mothers' capacity to organize their everyday lives in terms of paid work, care responsibilities, and other life domains. The role of family policies, such as public childcare systems and cash transfers, has been emphasized in enabling single parents to make ends meet and engage fully in paid work. (e.g. [Morrisens, 2018](#); [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#).)

Despite extensive and generous social – especially family – policies that support both mothers’ and fathers’ capacities to do paid work in Finland, earlier studies (e.g. [Moilanen, 2019](#)) have revealed that single mothers face more challenges to combine work and family life.

According to triple bind theory inadequacies in resources, employment and policies are highly intertwined ([Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). This becomes evident for example in possibilities to do paid work. If family policies do not support single parents’ opportunities to do paid work in terms of childcare services, single parents might not be able to do paid work, at least not on a full-time basis. This further affects their abilities to make ends meet. ([Gornick et al., 2022](#).) Moreover, inadequacies are constantly evolving as labor market, social policies and family situation of single parents are also changing ([Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)).

To conclude, the triple bind can be seen as comprising competing (and interacting) demands that single parents are confronted with in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, single parents are a heterogeneous group and so triple binds and their inadequacies will become evident in diverse ways and to different extents. One of the most important difference is related to the role of other adults – for example the non-resident parent and single parent’s own parents (in-law) – in the lives of single parent families. The extent other adults are involved shapes the ways different inadequacies are evident in everyday lives of single parents. Furthermore, these inadequacies are also faced by two-parent families although it is presumed that compared to two-parent families, single parent families have to negotiate the complexities of different inadequacies more often. ([Gornick, 2018](#); [Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2018](#); [Gornick et al., 2022](#))

The limited research on single parents and the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the pandemic posed additional challenges to single mothers. These challenges included both financial and social challenges driven by the breakdown of routines and emergence of new situations to which single parents needed to adapt ([Sánchez-Mira et al., 2022](#)). Financial problems were evident, especially for single parents who lost work because of the pandemic (e.g. [Choi et al., 2020](#); [Dromey et al., 2020](#); [Goldberg et al., 2021](#); [Parolin and Lee, 2022](#)). For employed single parents, the main pandemic-related challenge was managing the competing demands of paid work, care responsibilities, and home-schooling. According to [Hertz et al. \(2020\)](#), single mothers experienced pressure to manage their paid work and care responsibilities when the availability of childcare and school was limited or nonexistent. This led single mothers to feel they were failing in both life domains as well as created psychological distress ([Soskolne and Herbst-Debby, 2022](#)). [Parolin and Lee \(2022\)](#) suggest that many challenges that single parents faced prior to the pandemic increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, [Craig and Churchill \(2021\)](#) suggested that Australian single mothers were more satisfied with their balance between paid and unpaid work than partnered mothers. When it comes to social relationships, studies have revealed that single parents faced different kinds of conflicts with their ex-partners, for example in relation to adherence to COVID-19 safety guidelines or the division of care and home-schooling responsibilities ([Goldberg et al., 2021](#); [Smyth et al., 2020](#)).

To the best of our knowledge, no Finnish studies have focused on single-parent families and the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, some studies have included single parents along with two-parent families; for the most part, they strengthen the conclusion that single-parent families – i.e. single mothers – were hit harder by the pandemic than two-parent families. [Yerkes et al. \(2022\)](#) revealed that Finnish mothers in general experienced more difficulties in work-life balance during lockdown than Dutch mothers; this effect was especially pronounced among Finnish single mothers. [Sutela and Pärnänen \(2021\)](#) suggested that the pandemic might have had longer-term effects on single-parent families. According to their study, the blurring of boundaries between work and other life domains was more prevalent among single parents than two-parent families in 2021 (after the lockdown but when the pandemic was still present). Single parents also felt that they

neglected home-related issues more than parents in two-parent families. Nevertheless, as for economic consequences, [Sirniö et al. \(2021\)](#) stated that in 2020 earned income decreased less (both in absolute and relative terms, compared to 2019) in single-parent families than in other families with children.

## Data and methods

### *Data*

Our data comprise answers to an online survey on Finnish families' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. The survey included quantitative questions on reconciling work–family responsibilities and marital and parental conflicts, as well as qualitative open-ended questions concerning everyday life during the pandemic. In this study, we are interested in the survey's qualitative data; the quantitative questions were only used to provide contextual information on single mothers' situations during lockdown. The survey was launched on 23 April 2020, about four weeks after the Finnish government administered physical distancing guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19. Data collection ended on 17 May 2020, a few days after schools and childcare facilities had restarted normal operations.

The data were gathered using convenience sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique. In nonprobability sampling, subjective methods are used to gather the sample and the data are not representative of the population ([Etikan et al., 2016](#)). In this study, convenience sampling was chosen to enable data collection during the lockdown. To minimize problems related to convenience sampling, efforts were made to spread information about data collection through different channels. The main channel used to advertise the survey was the University of Turku's communication service, which shared a press release on the study with more than 400 media representatives around Finland. Additionally, information on data collection was shared through the University of Turku and the researchers' own social media accounts.

The sample comprised 653 respondents, who were parents with at least one child under 18 years of age. All subjects gave their informed consent before participating in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and all research procedures conformed to generally accepted ethical standards. In this study, we were interested only in single mothers (as defined in the first endnote), and analysis was only based on information from one qualitative open-ended question. It asked respondents to write down their families' everyday life experiences during the lockdown, in terms of challenges and possible solutions. The data included 58 single mothers, of which 41 responded to the qualitative open-ended question. As [O'Reilly and Parker \(2013\)](#) state, in a qualitative study, the adequacy of a sample is determined by the appropriateness of the data, not the number of participants. Here, the 41 responses were formulated by participants who had personal experiences of the research topic. Therefore, the sample consists of participants who best represent the research topic, which is often seen as an important criterion for qualitative studies ([Morse et al., 2002](#)). Answers were originally written in Finnish and quotations presented in result-section were translated to English.

[Table 1](#) presents single mothers' background information; our sample comprised mainly highly educated single mothers (around 84% had a university or applied university degree). Other important features relate to their employment situation and childcare arrangements during lockdown. The vast majority of single mothers in our sample were in paid work; only a few were either unemployed or laid-off. Working remotely at home was the most common working arrangement during lockdown, although some single mothers continued working at their workplace or combined remote work with working at their workplace. Notably, the vast majority of children were at home during lockdown, i.e. they did not attend formal childcare or on-site school teaching. Thus, many single mothers were in a situation where both they and

		Single earners and carers during lockdown
<i>Age</i>		
Youngest	30 years	
Oldest	58 years	
Median	40 years	
<i>Education<sup>1</sup></i>		
Low	0 (0)	
Medium	16 (6)	
High	84 (33)	<b>151</b>
<i>Number of children</i>		
1	28 (11)	
2	50 (21)	
3 or more	22 (9)	
<i>Age of the youngest child</i>		
under 7 years old	38 (15)	
between 7 and 12 years old	50 (21)	
between 13 and 17 years old	12 (5)	
<i>Work situation during lockdown</i>		
remotely at home	48 (20)	
partly remotely at home and partly at workplace	15 (6)	
at the workplace	15 (6)	
unemployed or laid-off	5 (2)	
other (e.g. studying or parental leave)	17 (7)	
<i>Childcare/school attendance during lockdown</i>		
children (mainly) at home	88 (36)	
children partly at home and partly in childcare/school	10 (4)	
children (mainly) in childcare/school	2 (1)	
<b>Note(s):</b> <sup>1</sup> Information on education is missing for two single mothers		
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors' own creation		

**Table 1.**  
Quantitative  
background  
information on single  
mothers in our data,  
% (n)

their children were at home during lockdown. [Table 1](#) also shows that single mothers represent a varied group in terms of age, number of children, and age of their youngest child.

### *Method and analysis*

In the early stage of planning this study, we conducted iterative readings to understand everyday challenges faced by Finnish single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this process we noted that these challenges appeared to settle well with the triple bind theory ([Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). Therefore, we applied this framework as a guideline and analyzed data with a theory-driven approach ([Silverman, 2004](#)). Initially, MS read the data several times and selected all quotations that responded to the research question; she then labeled them with initial codes. Subsequently, she grouped the codes into larger categories (sub themes). Thereafter, she organized these larger categories under the three headings of triple bind theory: inadequacies in resources, employment, and policies. MS then presented the analysis process to research team and consensus was reached. The analysis was performed using the NVivo12 software.

### **Findings**

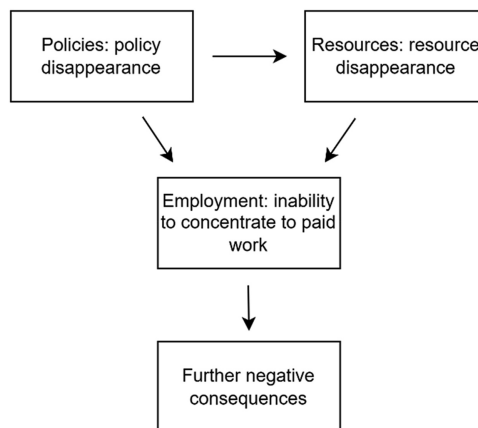
Our results looking at inadequate resources, employment, and policies are presented separately below. This does not imply that these factors are unrelated; rather, the opposite is

true. As triple bind theory emphasizes (e.g. [Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2018](#)), the interplay of these three dimensions is of primary importance. [Figure 1](#) illustrates this interplay in our data. Our analysis shows that lockdown created two kinds of disappearances: policy-disappearance and resource-disappearance which mean that single mothers lost some of the formal family policy as well as informal network supports that were available prior to the pandemic. These disappearances contributed to difficulties in single mothers' ability to concentrate on paid work, thus creating a kind of "constrained framework" where single mothers tried to manage everyday responsibilities. This "constrained framework" had further negative consequences on single mothers' and their families' well-being.

*Inadequate policies*

According to triple bind theory, social policy plays a significant role in supporting the well-being of single mothers (e.g. [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). In our data, inadequate policies refer mainly to "policy-disappearance" during lockdown. Moreover, policy-disappearance refers exclusively to certain features of family policies: policy-disappearance was most evident in terms of childcare systems and comprehensive schools. In-person school teaching was replaced by remote teaching and the government recommended that preschool-aged children should be cared for at home; thus, family policies that normally enable Finnish parents – especially (single) mothers – to engage in (full-time) paid work vanished. Hence, Finnish single mothers were left responsible for managing the care and well-being of their children during the day, which for many meant a complete change in their routines and everyday lives.

Despite the shared perception of policy-disappearance, single mothers had varying experiences of the level of policy-related inadequacies. Specifically, concrete challenges varied according to the age of children. Single mothers with preschool-aged children struggled to provide the constant childcare they require, especially with regards to organizing meaningful activities. For those with school-aged children, policy-disappearance meant single mothers were transformed into teaching assistants who helped with school assignments or with using new digital software. As the vast majority of single mothers were in paid work, policy-disappearance was intertwined with their work responsibilities.



**Figure 1.**  
Triple bind of Finnish single mothers during lockdown

Source(s): Authors' own creation

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Thus, employed single mothers faced a triple burden requiring them to adopt – often simultaneously – three roles: a single earner, carer, and teacher (see also [Hertz et al., 2020](#)).

The most challenging thing is that my child needs attention during the whole day, even though I try to focus on my work. It is understandable, as the child is 6 years old, but pretty exhausting. My ability to focus on work has severely declined and my work is interrupted constantly. Now my child asks for a different kind of attention than before, because they [2] are not in preschool. They want company, for example to play tag or to build Lego.

Responsibility for children’s remote schooling is solely on my shoulders. Basically I try to manage my job, my children’s remote schooling, and other everyday responsibilities alone . . . In my job I need to occasionally work at the workplace, but I’m forced to help the children with their school issues several times a day.

Variation among single mothers became evident also in terms of remote teaching, to which schools had varying approaches; families also differed in their need for support in this regard. It seems that single mothers whose children needed some form of extra support, for example related to learning difficulties or concentration disorders, faced increased resource inadequacy related to remote teaching. Some single mothers described how they were left without sufficient support from the school, even after asking for it. Especially in these families, support for remote teaching was unable to compensate for the support they usually received from in-person teaching; single mothers were faced with the burden of becoming “on-call” teaching assistants.

My firstborn has major problems in their cognitive control which have exploded into my hands during lockdown. To make them do their schoolwork is hard, sometimes impossible. They are unable to do schoolwork without adult supervision and help. After a few weeks, we got some help from the school but it wasn’t enough.

### *Inadequate resources*

The notion of inadequate resources stems from the idea that the absence of a cohabiting partner limits care, income, time, and flexibility resources in single-parent families (e.g. [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). In the everyday lives of Finnish single mothers during the COVID-19 lockdown, inadequate resources became most evident in their struggle to independently manage everyday responsibilities of paid work, the increased care burden, and household tasks. Inadequate time resources were particularly underlined. During the lockdown, various everyday responsibilities had to be completed within the same timeframe: single mothers tried to manage their paid work, take care of children, help older children with their schoolwork, while also doing other household work, such as providing lunch for everyone at home. These simultaneous “work-shifts,” marked by inadequate time resources, seemed to spillover and create new constraints on other resources, such as flexibility to organize everyday life and care for children.

In single parent families, days are long and during lockdown more stressful than normally. Even if my children are “easy-learners” they need help in organizing their work and need encouragement, a lot of help! Also providing food for them and making sure they get outdoors sometimes takes my time. I’m not able to start my workday until children end their school-day. I had to write one important report at night, which was the only time no one disturbed me.

The COVID-19 lockdown also underlined the resource inadequacies that emerged from not having a cohabiting partner. Many single mothers felt they were “left alone” to manage the competing demands of paid work, childcare, and household tasks. In many cases, the main responsibility for everyday routines was already on the shoulders of single mothers before the pandemic. The lockdown, however, intensified the feeling of bearing these

responsibilities alone. This was because of resource-disappearance: lockdown hindered or constrained the capacity to receive social resources that might normally be available. Lockdown suspended single mothers' unofficial support networks. During spring 2020, people over 70 years old were considered an at-risk group; thus, the normally crucial support of grandparents was unavailable. Moreover, in some cases restrictions prevented cooperation and shared care arrangements with non-resident parents; some of these arrangements had to be suspended because of physical distancing recommendations.

Those divorced parents who are primary parents [single parents] are left all alone to try and to manage on their own.

For some single mothers, resource inadequacies led them to the conclusion that maintaining the standards of "normal everyday life" during lockdown was simply too demanding; they opted for to downgrade their standards to facilitate daily coping. A concrete downgrade involved extending children's screen time, which provided single mothers time to concentrate on paid work and household duties. Moreover, some single mothers pointed out that the struggle with competing demands and inadequate resources resulted in other negative consequences, such as problems with their own coping, exhaustion, and increased family conflicts.

The child has way too much screen time, because I'm too tired to start a fight. Also, there are not so many alternatives to screen time, because you are not allowed to see friends or go to the outdoor playground.

I'm constantly on edge with my own coping. This naturally affects all social relationships, with children and with my colleagues . . . For the first time in my life I'm scared for my own mental health.

Overall, single mothers clearly stressed time-related inadequacies, but also those related to care and flexibility. Nevertheless, income inadequacy was mentioned only by one single mother. This is probably because single mothers in our data were mainly highly educated; only a few were unemployed or laid off during the lockdown.

### *Inadequate employment*

Inadequate employment refers to a wide variety of conditions related to inequality in employment and precarious employment conditions, such as the gender pay gap; ability to do paid work; part-time, flexible and non-standard working schedules; and in-work poverty (e.g. [Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). Earlier studies (e.g. [Hertz et al., 2020](#); [Parolin and Lee, 2022](#)) have shown, that during the pandemic, single mothers have experienced more difficulties in balancing paid work and care responsibilities because formal childcare has not been available. This becomes evident also in our data, as single mothers widely describe challenges regarding the ability to do paid work, more precisely managing the competing demands of paid work, childcare, and other household responsibilities. An interesting – although perhaps unsurprising – finding is that problems related to combining paid work and childcare responsibilities appear to be more or less universal among single mothers. Another observable notion is that the perceived challenge of struggling with competing demands of paid work and childcare is tightly intertwined with policy inadequacy – the policy-disappearance – as well resource inadequacy, i.e. the obligation to shoulder such responsibilities alone.

My job is demanding and requires expertise; besides that I take care of cooking as well as doing the laundry and other household duties.

To be honest, taking care of children and working fulltime as a single parent is f\*\*king hard.

Despite the nearly universal experience of struggling to combine paid work and other life domains, there was variation in how single mothers described the forms of inadequacy they

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face. The degree of work-related (in)flexibility appears to be a significant divisional factor; its importance becomes evident in two ways. First, in relation to whether single mothers were able, or were forced, to work remotely. Intriguingly neither working remotely nor in the workplace were portrayed as optimal solutions; rather, they simply implied different (and mainly negative) consequences. The main concrete challenge faced by those switching to remote work was managing paid work and other responsibilities in the same time and place; among those continuing to work at workplaces, it related to children being left alone without care and help for longer periods of time than they wanted.

The situation is challenging, because my job requires a quiet working environment, but children playing and arguments easily become very loud. This disturbs and interrupts my working regularly. In addition, during the first month of remote school I also needed to cook lunch [3].

People who are not able to work remotely have been totally forgotten, some of us still have to go to the workplace as before the pandemic. Hence, children and young people are home alone too much.

Second, divisions were also visible among single mothers who worked remotely. An important factor in the experience of inadequacy was the (un)availability of flexible work time. Single mothers who had fixed work schedules were caught in a situation where they had to simultaneously manage work shifts and the competing demands of paid work, childcare, and other household responsibilities. Competing time demands were less crucial for single mothers with more working time flexibility. Nevertheless, in these situations paid work spilled over to evenings, nights, and weekends. Hence, paid work was completed at the cost of leisure time.

Because I'm not able to work properly during days and I have no partner who could help, I'm forced to work during evenings and nights after I get the children to bed.

Inflexibility concerning paid work caused feelings of inadequacy and bad conscience. Some single mothers described how they felt that they were failing, both as parents and as employees; lockdown created a situation where they were unable to “perform” as parents or employees according to their usual and desired standards. For some, one consequence was the abovementioned downgrade of standards, but in this case regarding paid work: in order to manage the challenge of combining work and other responsibilities, some single mothers opted to temporarily downgrade their work goals. This was perceived as an undesirable necessity.

I do what I can to help my older child in their preschool assignments, but when it comes to taking care of my younger child and my job, I get a sense of inadequacy. You would want to focus properly on either childcare or your job, but it's not possible. You need to manage both [child and work].

It is noticeable that inadequate employment was rather one-sidedly portrayed as a challenge to combine paid work and other life domains. During spring 2020 in Finland, unemployment and layoffs fell primarily upon certain working sectors, such as the hospitality and tourism industries, which are highly female-dominated (e.g. [Mesiäislehto et al., 2022](#)). However, these issues did not appear in our data. The invisibility of unemployment and layoffs is probably related to our sample, i.e. highly educated single mothers. Although hospitality and tourism are female-dominated, their street-level workers are often not highly educated. Another reason might relate to the wording of the question in our survey. It emphasized families' everyday life experiences and challenges during the lockdown, but single mothers may have perceived paid work as an individual matter rather than a family experience.

## Conclusion

In this article, we examined everyday challenges Finnish single mothers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in spring 2020. We applied triple bind theory and were

interested in how Finnish single mothers managed the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment, and inadequate policies during the lockdown. We draw three key conclusions from our results.

First, our results are in line with earlier studies (e.g. [Hertz et al., 2020](#); [Parolin and Lee, 2022](#); [Sánchez-Mira et al., 2022](#)), and they clearly demonstrate that the lockdown both created new and enhanced already existing inadequacies in the lives of single mothers. This became evident in single mothers' experience of being left alone to manage the competing demands of paid work, childcare, remote school, and other household duties. This experience was driven by the disappearance of both policies and resources. At the policy level, the most crucial dimensions of Finnish family policies that enable the (full-time) employment of especially (single) mothers disappeared, namely childcare services and schools. In the case of resource-disappearance, some single mothers lost their usual social support networks which are often essential to manage daily life and balance paid work and care responsibilities ([Moilanen, 2019](#)). Because of physical distancing recommendations, unofficial help from, for example, single mothers' parents was unavailable. Moreover, in some cases physical distancing guidelines obstructed normally functioning relationships with a non-resident parent.

Second, as a result of the abovementioned policy- and resource-disappearances, many single mothers lost their normal ability to concentrate on paid work. Indeed, difficulties to combine paid work, childcare, and other responsibilities emerged as an overarching lockdown experience among Finnish single mothers. Before the pandemic, single mothers already faced a sharp trade-off between employment and family (e.g. [Daly and Kelly, 2015](#)). According to our results, lockdown and its restrictions added a new level to this trade-off, especially because of policy- and resource-disappearances. The degree of employment (in) flexibility seemed to be an important factor shaping single mothers' experiences. Those with less flexibility had fewer possibilities to manage the competing demands of paid work, childcare, and other responsibilities. On the other hand, those with greater working time flexibility faced the trade-off that paid work spilled over to evenings, nights, and weekends. A worrying notion is that lockdown inadequacies in policies, resources, and employment had further negative consequences for the well-being of some single mothers and their families, such as problems with coping, increased conflicts with children, or feelings of insufficiency (see also [Parolin and Lee, 2022](#); [Soskolne and Herbst-Debby, 2022](#)).

Third, as expected by triple bind theory (e.g. [Gornick, 2018](#); [Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis, 2018](#)), observed lockdown-related inadequacies related to policies, resources, and employment were not exclusive to single parents. Many of the challenges single mothers experienced have also become evident in studies examining two-parent families during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies (e.g. [Hennekam and Shymko, 2020](#)) have shown that all families with children have struggled with combining paid work and care responsibilities. Moreover, some studies (e.g. [Power, 2020](#)) have revealed that in some cases mothers have borne the main responsibility for increased childcare and remote school assistance.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that, for example, policy-disappearance was more crucial for single mothers as they also faced increased resource inadequacies, i.e. in many cases they shouldered everyday responsibilities alone without help from a partner. In a sense, single mothers have – and already had pre-pandemic – fewer degrees of freedom to negotiate, for example, how to manage their work and family responsibilities ([Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018](#)). This conclusion is strengthened by the notion of, for example, [Salin et al. \(2020\)](#), namely that the ability to share the burden of increased childcare and other household responsibilities between partners was seen by Finnish parents as a primary coping strategy during the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, some studies (e.g. [Craig and Churchill, 2020](#); [Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2021](#)) have shown that fathers have taken more active role in childcare during lockdowns and that being able to share the increased childcare burden with other parent, has led to less severe work-life conflict among mothers.

These kinds of options to ease childcare burden are not available for the vast majority of single mothers.

An important question is whether there are any lessons to be learned based on our results, for example in case of another pandemic in the future? Our results underline the importance that family policy has for single parents' ability to engage in paid work and for well-being of single mother families. Since the lockdown the Finnish media and politicians have reflected quite critically both the decision to switch to remote school and the recommendation that children under school-age should be taken care at home. It has been stated that the consequences of these measures in terms of children's and (single) parents' well-being have been more negative than the positive consequences of hindering the spread of COVID-19. Thus, in the wake of new pandemics in the future, the threshold to make similar kind of decisions would probably be higher.

There are a few limitations that should be borne in mind when considering our conclusions. To begin with, the sample in our study was rather small and some of the writings analyzed were rather short. Nevertheless, in a qualitative study, the adequacy of a sample is not determined by the number of participants nor the absolute length of the data, but rather by the appropriateness of the data (see [O'Reilly and Parker, 2013](#)). Despite the sample size, our data provided diverse experiences concerning everyday challenges of single mothers in Finland during COVID-19.

In addition, we analyzed a sample of predominantly highly educated and employed single mothers. This might explain why challenges related to combining paid work and other responsibilities were so prevalent. It is probably also why, for example, financial difficulties were hardly mentioned. Moreover, because of data issues we were unable to study men at all: neither as resident parents nor as non-resident parents, who most often are fathers. Our data included only a few non-resident fathers, so they could not be analyzed, but their experiences point towards the idea that lockdown realities were very different for resident and non-resident parents. Hence, in future it is vitally important to study experiences of lockdown from these perspectives. Furthermore, it should be noted that our study was restricted to challenges during the Finnish lockdown in spring 2020. Since then, there have been no further strict lockdowns in Finland (i.e. elementary schools have not widely switched to remote teaching). Also, preschool childcare has been open normally and there has been no recommendation to take care of children at home. Nevertheless, it is important to analyze possible longer-term effects of lockdown for single parents. Have, for example, problems related to cooperation with non-resident parents vanished, continued, or worsened after the lockdown?

Last but not least, our study focused solely on *challenges* single mothers faced during lockdown. This does not imply a total absence of positive experiences. For example, as [Merla and Murru \(2022\)](#) have stated, functioning shared custody arrangements have been important in limiting potential negative well-being impacts during lockdowns. Furthermore, [Sánchez-Mira et al. \(2022\)](#) have suggested that single parents might in some sense have higher resilience towards lockdown challenges as, prior to the pandemic, they already needed more adaptability and capacity to respond to breakdowns of everyday structuring than partnered families. Additionally, our data show that in some cases the lockdown brought families closer together, made everyday life less hectic, and enabled a better relationship with the non-resident parent. Thus, it is also important to study experiences and factors that supported single parents' well-being during the pandemic.

## Notes

1. By single mothers, we refer to women living in households with at least one child under 18 years old and no cohabiting partner.
2. Gender-neutral pronouns are used throughout to further ensure anonymity.

3. After the first few weeks of remote schooling, many municipalities started to offer take-away school lunches; these “lunch-boxes” were picked up from schools.

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