Implications of an incomplete gender revolution for low-resourced single mothers in Sweden

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Introduction

A challenge for contemporary policymaking is creating policies that support diverse families (Nieuwenhuis and Van Lancker 2020). In parallel with its increased incorporation of gender equality into employment-care policies and principles, the EU has shifted towards an expectation that most adults will participate intensively in the labour market (Ferree 2010; Jenson 2015; Lewis 2009). By extension, families with two parents are expected to be dual earners, thus creating new care needs that in part can explain the growing promotion of families where both mothers and fathers contribute to income and care. Albeit not spreading uniformly across countries (Aboim 2010), the dual-earner-dual-carer model is increasingly promoted by the European Union (European Commission 2017), and in academic literature, the dual-earner-dual-care model is often considered the most desirable way forward to an egalitarian society (Ellingsæter 2024; Gornick and Meyers 2008). The dual-earner-dual-carer model rests on the assumption that families are constituted by two parents who can share earnings and caring responsibilities. This makes it relevant to explore how families *not* constituted by two parents living in the same household fare in a policy context where the dual-earner-dual-carer model prevails.

Sweden has been identified as a forerunner in family change (Ohlsson-Wijk, Turunen, and Andersson 2020) and the gender revolution (Esping-Andersen 2016; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015). In Sweden, the ability to combine paid work and family life in a gender-equal way has been a policy aim for decades (Öun and Grönlund 2022), plausibly playing part in why Sweden has become known as "one of the most family-friendly and egalitarian countries in the world" (Evertsson and Malmquist 2023:1). Arguably, however, the main focus of Sweden's quest for gender equality has been on supporting dual-earner-dual-carer families through gender-neutral family policies (Björnberg 2002; Nyberg 2012). Almost thirty years ago, Hobson and Takahashi (1997) noted that the subsumption of single mothers in the mainstream policy framework for working parents may obscure their unique social and economic pressures. There is a risk that the dual-earner-dual-carer model may leave a policy lacuna for supporting single-parent households, who do not have the additional earner and carer as a resource.

In line with Sweden's dual-earner-dual-carer model and its quest for gender-equal parenting, single parents have in recent years become increasingly subject to expectations to share parenting equally with a parent they are not living with. The state strongly endorses joint legal custody, which has been the default arrangement after parental union dissolution since 1998 (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Blomqvist and Heimer 2016; Hakovirta and Rantalaiho 2011),

irrespective of whether they were previously married or cohabiting. Notably, there are few rules, guidelines, or checks regarding how single parents with joint legal custody should share parental responsibilities in practice. Unlike in many other countries, single parents are not required to make formal parenting and child support plans; authorities only get involved if a report of concern has been made to social services, if parents jointly request support, or if one parent brings a custody or child support case to court. Relatedly, it has been suggested that the introduction of joint legal custody as a default arrangement is better characterised by compulsory *fatherhood*, than by compulsory *fathering* (Bergman and Hobson 2002); while it imposes an obligation on fathers to care for their children, it does not ensure they do so in a substantial way.

Although the gender revolution has been considered beneficial to many families in Sweden, it remains stratified and incomplete (Esping-Andersen 2016). Families in Sweden still tend to be gender-structured (Ahlberg, Roman, and Duncan 2008; Björnberg 2002; Dribe and Stanfors 2009; Grunow and Evertsson 2016), and socioeconomically advantaged parents share parenting responsibilities more equally than less advantaged parents (Duvander, Ferrarini, and Johansson 2015; Garriga, Turunen, and Bernardi 2021). This matters as some families may be left behind or even pushed back by the gender revolution and policies designed to underpin it. Despite the well-documented gendered dimension of single parenting (Gornick 2018) and that single mothers still constitute one of Sweden's most economically vulnerable groups (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2022), little is known about what Sweden's policy focus on gender-equal parenting, and its growing application to single parents, means for low-resourced single mothers' experiences. This study aims to address this research gap.

This study aims to explore how low-resourced single mothers fare in a policy context that seeks gender equality by focusing on two-parent families. It contributes to theorising how policy ideals of gender equality through dual-earner-dual-carer families and shared parenting shape and risk exacerbating the consequences of gendered inequalities for low-resourced single mothers. It does so by focusing on the distinct challenges low-resourced single mothers face, compared to low-resourced coupled parents, as they navigate family needs in a policy context where father involvement is increasingly expected from a policy standpoint. I discuss whether all families are equally supported by Sweden's dual-earner-dual-carer policy model, and what implications a narrow policy focus on gender-equal parenting may have for low-resourced single mothers.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do low-resourced single and coupled parents share resources and family responsibilities?
2. What policies do they find helpful or not and why?
3. What are the implications of how family responsibilities and resources are shared, and their interplay with policies designed to underpin gender-equal parenting?

Theorising Single Mothers' Place in the Stratified and Incomplete Gender Revolution

A framework that has been developed to describe and explain the impact of changing yet unequal gender relations on family life is the Gender Revolution Framework (Goldscheider et al. 2015). The uneven and stalled gender revolution denotes the period of sweeping changes, sparked in many "Western" societies in the 1960s, which saw a substantially increased presence of (primarily middle-class) women in employment, but which was unmatched by a move of men into care work and homemaking in the private sphere (England 2010). The Gender Revolution Framework contends that as men's work-family practices increasingly match women's, families will become more stable – with more unions, childbirth, and less union dissolution (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

Whereas the original framework centres on the nuclear family, it has recently been extended to post-dissolution families (Eriksson and Kolk 2024). Sweden has been identified as a frontrunner in the gender revolution and as a context where it is relatively more complete, as fathers have picked up a greater share of child-related responsibilities than in any other context (Esping-Andersen 2016; Goldscheider et al. 2015). Notably, however, the gender revolution has been stratified, in the sense that gender differences have diminished more in highly educated couples than in couples with lower levels of education (Esping-Andersen 2016, p.52).

Relatedly, research shows systematic differences between single-parent and two-parent families, as well as between different single parenting situations in Sweden. Inequalities operate in at least three ways: First, single parent families are at greater risk of poverty compared to two-parent families (Försäkringskassan 2022; OECD 2024). Second, socioeconomically advantaged single parents divide physical custody for children more equally than socioeconomically disadvantaged single parents (Garriga et al. 2021; Statistics Sweden 2023). Third, even though fathers are becoming increasingly involved, it is still common for children of single parents to live primarily with their mothers in Sweden (Hakovirta et al. 2023). These inequalities, together with the observation that socioeconomically advantaged parents have been the frontrunners of the gender revolution (England 2010; Esping-Andersen 2016), render it relevant to explore if all families benefit equally from the ongoing gender revolution and policies designed to underpin it. They also motivate a focus on how low-resourced single mothers are faring in gender revolution frontrunner countries like Sweden.

The Swedish Context

Gender-Neutral Family Policies Combined with Gendered and Classed Parenting

In line with the dual-earner-dual-carer model (Grönlund and Javornik 2014; Nyberg 2012), both women and men are expected to contribute to income and care for the family in Sweden. This applies to all parents, irrespective of if they live together or not (Harris-Short 2011). Sweden boasts relatively high levels of female labour market involvement and father involvement in childcare, supported by gender-neutral policies that aim to ease tensions between paid work and caregiving (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010; Goldscheider et al. 2015).

The growing expectation that single parents should share parenting responsibilities more equally can be seen as part and parcel of the long-standing policy shift in Sweden from conceiving of fathers primarily as cash providers to fathers as carers (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Blomqvist and Heimer 2016), with incentives and expectations on fathers to engage more in childcare (Harris-Short, 2011). A key change in this process affecting both coupled and single parents has been the gradual introduction of three months of the paid parental leave scheme reserved for each parent. Coupled and single parents can also take paid care leave from work to care for sick children up to age twelve. Benefit levels are earnings-related, and recipients receive approximately 80 percent of gross earnings, up to specified caps. Entitlement to public childcare begins at age one.

Given that single parents are subsumed under the mainstream policy framework developed for working parents (Hobson and Takahashi 1997), they are not entitled to more support than coupled parents. For instance, and in contrast to single parents in other Nordic countries (Romanus et al. 2001), single parents in Sweden are not entitled to higher child benefit levels from the state than coupled parents. In line with Swedish policy aims of gender neutrality (Bergman and Hobson 2002), the child benefit is by default split evenly between legal guardians with joint legal custody of children born after March 2014. However, parents can opt for one parent to receive the full child benefit.

Single Parents and Shared Parenting in Sweden

In parallel with growing expectations that single parents should share responsibilities with the child's other parent, single parents have on average come to share parenting responsibilities

more equally (Eriksson & Kolk, 2024). According to recent survey data, 46% of children with single parents live more or less equal amounts of time with each parent (Statistics Sweden 2023). In an international perspective, Sweden has the highest levels of equal joint physical custody in Europe (Meyer et al. 2024). However, 43% of children live only or primarily with their mothers (Statistics Sweden 2023). Sixteen percent of all families in Sweden are headed by a single mother, compared to 5 percent by a single father (Statistics Sweden 2022).

To acknowledge and meet the needs of the growing group of parents who share parental responsibilities equally or nearly equally (Harnesk et al. 2011; Malmgren 2022) a bundle of policies (including child benefits, child maintenance support, and housing benefits) have recently been re-designed in Sweden. Parents with joint legal custody share the legal right and responsibility to satisfy the child's needs, including the right and duty to make decisions about the child's upbringing (Government Offices of Sweden 2023b), but few checks are in place to ensure that responsibilities are shared equally. Custodial parents are responsible for ensuring that the child gets to see the other parent regularly and can be fined or have a contact order enforced by the police if they do not support the child's contact with the other parent (Eriksson 2011). There are no measures for forcing an unwilling parent to see the child. Cases have been documented where courts order visitation support even when there is a history of violence (Bergman and Eriksson 2018).

To ensure the child's financial maintenance, parents with above 60% physical custody are entitled to child support from the other parent. There is no statutory minimum, but most parents tend to agree on the amount the Swedish Social Insurance Agency pays if the other parent fails to pay (Statistics Sweden 2023). Explicitly aiming to promote parental cooperation and the reduction of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's (SSIA) caseload (Fernqvist and Sépulchre 2022), the Swedish state stopped acting as an intermediary to organise child support payments in 2016, unless special circumstances could be shown. If child support is not received from the other parent, the child may be entitled to maintenance support paid via the SSIA. The non-custodial parent is liable for reimbursing the SSIA.

The Gender Revolution framework posits that gender-equal sharing of family responsibilities is beneficial for families. While evidence suggests that gender-neutral policies have enabled many families to share responsibilities more equally, it has not led to change in all families. This paper focuses on the experiences of parents who do not share family responsibilities gender-equally, and how they fare in a context where policies are designed to underpin gender-equal sharing.

Methods

This study draws on qualitative focus group interview data collected within an international research project about families' capacities to respond to socio-economic and other risks, the rEUsilience project, approval number 2022-07090-01. The research was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Focus group data were collected by the author through seven focus group interviews with 38 participants (35 female), in five locations across two large and two medium-sized cities in different regions of Sweden, during spring 2023. This study focuses on the 31 participants who were single mothers or coupled parents (16 single mothers, 13 coupled mothers, and 2 coupled fathers). The group size varied between two and 10 participants.

Focus group interviews were employed to allow participants to collectively identify, discuss, and reflect on potentially sensitive topics around difficulties making ends meet with others in a similar situation (Kitzinger 1994). The interviews were designed to capture and explore family diversity; single parents were one of four family situations of specific interest to the project. All seven focus groups were conducted with participants who identified as "struggling to make ends meet". Four focus group interviews were conducted with participants from low-resourced families, two were only open to participants with migrant backgrounds, and one was specifically open to single parents. While one group consisted solely of single mothers, single mothers participated in three out of seven focus groups.

Community-based organisations (non-governmental organisations that give practical support to low-resourced and other families, stay-and-play preschools) helped directly recruit parents who self-identified as struggling to make ends meet. A total of 190 organisations/branches of organisations were contacted throughout the fieldwork period. Approximately 45% of the organisations contacted responded to the initial outreach, and while most expressed interest in the research, they lacked the time and/or resources to participate. Other organisations declined because they felt unable to recruit the target group among their service users/members. In several cases, organisations informed service users about the research, but without finding individuals able and willing to participate. In the end, five organisations helped recruit participants. In all seven cases, recruitment relied on a local organisation/group that reached out to parents who accessed their support services (e.g. food support, language courses, cheap activities for children, stay-and-play preschools); in some cases, some participants knew each other from beforehand.

The moderator and author of this paper used a semi-structured interview guide containing questions surrounding practices and experienced barriers related to money, caregiving, employment, and support from the welfare state. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 2 hours. At the end of each interview, participants filled in sociodemographic forms (see Table 1 for sociodemographic information on all quoted participants). A few participants did not stay until the end of the interview, as they had to pick up children, and some did not complete the form in full. Based on the forms and what was said in the interviews, around three-quarters of coupled parents were aged 26-45; meanwhile, around three-quarters of single parents were aged 36-55. Around one-quarter of the coupled parents were born in Sweden, compared to 69% of single mothers. The remarkably low proportion of coupled parents born in Sweden likely relates to the recruitment strategy, which relied on non-governmental support organisations, and we were therefore limited to people who seek out such support. Of the coupled parents, around one-quarter said it was easy or very easy to make ends meet, whereas more than half said it was difficult or very difficult to make ends meet. Of the single mothers, more than three-quarters said it was difficult or very difficult to make ends meet, and one said it was both easy and difficult.

"Struggling to make ends meet" is subjective and was used in order not to make participants feel stigmatised. There was evident variation in resources across the group. For instance, some owned their apartments and had full-time jobs, whereas others did not. What was common to the majority of participants was that they felt unable to meet the material living standards expected in Sweden today.

Pseudonym	Gender	Parenting status	Nativity	Employment status	Number of children
Eva	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed	1
Anna	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed, part-time	3
Jessica	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed, on sick leave	2
Nadine	Woman	Single	Migrant background	Unemployed/job-seeker	2
Mikael	Man	Coupled	Swedish-born	Employed	2
Johanna	Woman	Coupled	Swedish-born	Employed, part-time sick leave	2
Anja	Woman	Coupled	Migrant background	Unemployed/job-seeker	3

Camilla	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Unemployed/Job-seeker	3
Carina	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Long-term sick leave	1
Linda	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed	2
Leila	Woman	Single	Migrant background	Employed	2
Sanna	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed	No info
Alicia	Woman	Coupled	Swedish-born	Employed, on parental leave	3
Nadja	Woman	Coupled	Swedish-born	Employed	2
Amanda	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Employed, on sick leave	1
Elvira	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	Unemployed	1
Caroline	Woman	Single	Swedish-born	No info	1

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of quoted participants

Most participating single mothers were full-time single parents, with either sole or joint legal custody. A few had joint physical custody arrangements, but even in these cases, they described having the children most of the time. This is a common situation in Sweden today but does not represent the modal single parent, so the findings cannot be theoretically generalised to the wider group of mothers and fathers in single-parent households. By only including single mothers in this study, I cannot disentangle whether experiences relate to single parenting more generally, or to single mothering in particular. Although I analyse their experiences through a single motherhood lens, some conclusions likely apply more broadly to single parents. Nevertheless, the theoretical sampling of low-resourced single mothers for this study is justified by the intention to explore how low-resourced single mothers fare in an incomplete and stratified dual-earner-dual-carer context where gender inequalities are diminishing primarily in socioeconomically advantaged families.

Focus group interviews are particular social interactions (Cyr 2016; Morgan 1996), shaped by multiple social contexts and where participants, rather than telling their full life stories, strategically choose which narratives to tell to fit the perceived demands of the situation (Hollander 2004; Smithson 2000). Generally, there was consensus among focus group participants, and a substantial part of discussions tended to revolve around topics brought up

early in the interview. The fact that some issues more specific to single mothering were raised only in the single mother-only focus group could relate to the associational or status context (Hollander 2004): potentially either because they were invited in their "role" as single parents, or because they felt more comfortable speaking about these issues with others in a similar situation. Single mothers across focus groups invoked their status as single mothers to explain what their struggles were about, indicating that they felt comfortable to share this information with the group.

In contrast, disclosing and attributing one's difficulties to disagreements with the other parent seemed to be more sensitive, for coupled and single parents alike. Conflict with a partner was not discussed by coupled parents, and single parents rarely talked about conflict with a co-parent with coupled parents, but were willing to do so with each other. I do not conceive of focus group interviews as a method for gaining a comprehensive picture of the phenomenological experience of living as a low-resourced parent in Sweden. Rather, they provide insight into an understudied group and carry a mix of information that allow for different forms of inference-making (Tavory 2020), including reflections of participants' everyday circumstances and practices, as well as what narratives they find appropriate to construct and share in the given context.

The interviews were transcribed in Swedish and translated into English. The English transcriptions were compared to the Swedish ones to ascertain consistency. The transcripts were analysed using an abductive thematic approach (Thompson 2022; Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 2022). Abductive analysis aims to produce novel theoretical insights by testing inductively derived patterns in the empirical data against several existing theories, to determine the most likely explanation for the phenomenon at hand. The data were analysed with an analytical focus on similarities and differences between single and coupled parents. This involved reading through the transcripts and jotting down ideas of what the data could represent a case of, creating abductive codes based on known literature as well as on what seemed to recur in the data (Thompson 2022). Once the material had been coded, the codes were assessed. Prior knowledge that shaped the data analysis included literature on stratified work-family practices and social policy use. Meanwhile, the focus on the role of single and low-resourced parents in the gender revolution and what implications expectations of gender-equal parenting have for those unable to share equally was sparked by the focus group discussions around disengaged fathers and the under-recognition of single parenting.

Results

Most parents in this study shared experiences of struggling to make ends meet. Feelings of anxiety and shame tied to the inability to give their children what other children were thought to have, as well as difficulties securing access to social policy rights in times of need, were challenges common to many focus group participants. These aspects of the data have been reported on in more detail elsewhere.

Single mothers' accounts of their experiences around shared parenting and child responsibilities differed markedly from those of coupled parents. This study sheds light on and attempts to understand these differences in the context of the Swedish dual-earner-dual-carer model. Importantly, however, there was also evident variation within the single mother group. For instance, some single mothers confidently attributed their struggles to structural disadvantage and how welfare services were organised, whereas other mothers primarily described everyday problems in their individual lives without offering underlying explanations. For many, however, everyday problems involved challenging interactions with the welfare system. Together, their accounts pointed to potential flaws which I suggest can be solved through policies that better recognise single mothers' living situations and needs.

The findings suggest that, compared to coupled parents, single mothers face several disadvantages in the Swedish dual-earner-dual-carer context. Swedish social policies and societal norms are predicated on a perceived equal division of labour between parents, but in the absence of rules and checks to that end, the division can be highly unequal. This leads to under-recognised vulnerabilities among low-resourced single mothers, particularly those experiencing a gendered lack of division of labour with their co-parent.

The Illusion of Equally Divided Parenting and its Gendered Impacts

In spite of Sweden's family policies designed to enable parents to share responsibilities in a gender-equal way, most single mothers in this study had in common that they took on most, if not all, responsibilities related to their children. Some single mothers described fathers who had practically been absent from the point the child was born, whereas other fathers had "disappeared" in connection with a separation. For instance, Eva shared with the group that after her son's father had moved out, they were "basically neighbours, but he wasn't part of my son's life." She explained that the father had never bought the boy any birthday or Christmas

gifts, and barely knew which school he was in. Anna described a father who “wasn’t ready for kids, but also wasn’t ready to let go of half the child benefit.”

Not all single mothers were in this situation; a few described fathers who cared for their children and with whom the children would stay at least sometimes, but where the lion’s share of caregiving and financial responsibilities nevertheless were perceived to end up on their shoulders. Jessica told the group that “although we are two parents of the children, he has more or less rejected much of the responsibility.” Nadine described her ex as a “good father” who cared about the children and stated that social services had ordered them to follow an alternating schedule, where the children would spend a week with one parent and then a week with the other parent. In practice, however, she said that the children lived with her almost all the time and that it was only her paying for clothes, activities, and other things the children needed.

Interestingly, it was clear that most coupled parents did not share responsibilities gender equally either; typically, fathers had full-time jobs and picked up extra shifts as needed, whereas mothers described spending less time in paid employment and that they had taken or expected to take more leaves of absence from work. Clearly aware of current gender equality discourses, Mikael, a coupled night-shift working father somewhat jokingly explained that he was “the mother” in his household, because he “has less pay, works part-time” and therefore more often was the one “emptying the dishwasher, cooking dinner, and leaving and picking up from preschool.”

Contrasting with Mikael’s response, some coupled mothers who adhered to a more traditional division of labour appeared to feel a need to justify it, typically referencing their partner’s highly demanding jobs as incompatible with child-related tasks. Johanna, whose partner worked full-time with irregular work hours, said: “I juggle a lot and have a lot, like, I help with homework, I fix all the food, cleaning and so on.” Although she was under the impression that she often was a lot more tired than her partner, she explained she did not want to ask him for too much help: “It’s a lot about me not wanting to put stress on him now that he’s got a job that works well.”

A few coupled mothers were involuntarily unemployed, which seemed to exacerbate the gendered division of labour and associated pressures in their households. Anja recounted a time when she had complained to her partner about his long working hours and how disengaged and tired he would be after a shift at the construction site, to which he had responded: “Do you think I want to work like a donkey?” Such accounts speak to some negative implications of more traditional divisions of labour in low-resourced couples.

For some single mothers, the idea that coupled parents could struggle to make ends meet almost seemed a bit provoking. As the single mother-only group discussed a hypothetical scenario of two low-paid parents trying to make ends meet, Camilla became increasingly frustrated:

> I have a low-paid job, I have three kids, and I’m single. So, if I were to be with someone with a low-paid job... It would be the kingdom of heaven for me … Because they can support each other, when one studies, they can even, one could work and one could study.

Carina then chimed in to say, “and they can get some respite, taking turns having the kids”. Although these perceptions may dissonate with challenges experienced by some low-resourced couples, coupled parents in this study did typically benefit from each other’s resources such as income, time, and energy spent on children and homemaking. Lacking such opportunities for sharing responsibilities meant many single mothers had felt forced to change their work arrangements or quit stable employment upon separation. Linda was one of the first mothers to voice the difficulties she faced to the group:

> You have to adjust your working hours, and that forces you to, at least, I had to reduce my working hours. … And then it becomes an economic question, of course. That’s the impossible choice you have to make. There is no one else who can leave and pick up [from preschool], I’m the one who takes care of it all, and then I have to adjust everything in my life after that.

In another focus group interview, Leila explained that reducing her working hours was not an option as “the money and what we eat is already at the minimum.” The interviews took place during a recession (Government Offices of Sweden 2023a), and due to increasing costs, Leila could no longer afford to go to work by car. As she had realised it would be impossible to leave her eight-year-old daughter at school and get to her nursing shift on time, she had been left with few options but to ask her daughter to walk herself to school when it opened at six o’clock in the morning.

Although there was variation in what solution single mothers opted for, they illustrate what Christine Roman has called the money-care dilemma (Roman 2017), as they must choose between earning enough money to provide for their family and having time and energy to spend on their children. Certainly, some coupled mothers had also reduced their working hours to be able to pick children up from preschool within the socially accepted timeframe, whereas others had chosen not to reduce work hours so as not to have to reduce their standard of living. These coupled mothers also referenced the loss of income or less time with their children as substantial trade-offs. Alicia even described it as “being punished for being a committed parent” and Nadja said that “you don’t see your kids, it’s like a treadmill”. Nevertheless, coupled mothers benefitted from their partner’s resources and shared responsibilities with them, albeit not in a gender-equal way.

In contrast, single mothers generally felt they had few opportunities to share parenting responsibilities. Carina explained:

> I was thinking about this, workwise, emotionally and everything, all issues related to schools or care, everything, you are both mum and dad. … And the things that other parents typically [do], who share the workload, at least to some extent, falls on one person. And that puts huge pressure, mental pressure on you. It also puts physical pressure on you, with great impact on the body. And it puts huge financial pressure on you as well.

Carina had been a single mother since leaving the maternity ward. Shortly after, she had been forced to quit employment due to illness. Despite having gone through several court

proceedings to get her teenage daughter's high-income-earning father to pay more child support, Carina said he still only paid somewhat above the standard amount. Although low-resourced coupled parents also experienced difficulties tied to combining family responsibilities and needs, Carina stressed what she felt was a unique challenge of full-time single mothering; being "both mum and dad", where the lack of opportunity to share the workload means it falls on "one person", with mental, physical, emotional, and financial implications.

Rather than being characterised by a gendered division of labour, as in the case of the coupled parents in this study, full-time single mothering could be said to be characterised by a gendered *lack of* division of labour, in that they take on the lion's share of practical and financial responsibilities without benefitting at all or in a way they consider fair from the other parent's resources. Even when responsibilities were shared to some degree with the child's other parent, such as in Jessica's case, not benefitting from the other parent's material and social resources meant that her children had a lower standard of living at her place:

> There's a big difference between when my sons are with me and when they're with their father. The father has no economic difficulties, so he can give the children what they want. Then they come home to me saying, "Can I get some money, I'm going to the store with friends" or "I can take the deposit cans and recycle for money." But there are no cans because we can't afford it very often. It all turns into a vicious cycle. And they can get mad and annoyed, saying: "yes, but he got this," or "but daddy always gives us." Which of course leads to conflicts. It's very hard...

Jessica added that whereas her children's father had a large extended family who could provide him with relief support, she was not able to rely on support from them, or from her own family as they had their own difficulties to grapple with. In other words, it was often a combination of lacking someone to share responsibilities with and lacking access to the other parent's resources that complicated the single mothers' combining of resources and family needs.

Both coupled parents and single mothers in this study were affected by an illusion of equally divided labour. Coupled parents appeared to feel expected to share care gender-equally, implied by their justifications for why this was not possible in their circumstances but primarily seemed frustrated about not having as much income and time for their family as they would like. This aligns with previous research suggesting that norms around parenthood and gender render it challenging for coupled parents to use policies to reconcile paid work and family life despite Sweden's generous family policies (Grönlund and Javornik 2014). Single mothers not only did not share family responsibilities gender equally with the child's other parent but often lacked opportunities for sharing responsibilities with the child's other parent, while also not benefitting from their resources. This can be understood as a gendered *lack of* division of labour for many single mothers that results in various financial, mental, emotional, and physical implications.

Policies that Assume Shared Parenting and Do not Compensate for its Absence

A notable difference between coupled parents and single mothers in this study was the practical implications of joint legal custody and the accompanying expectation to share care for single mothers. A few coupled mothers did express frustration regarding the loss of parental leave benefits when their male partners did not make use of the earmarked "daddy months". As Nadja noted:

> Theoretically, everyone has the right to be on parental leave, but it's not the same in practice because, at his job, it doesn't work. He'll be unable to take parental leave and his days will just disappear.

Nadja expressed frustration regarding the money her family would lose as a result of her partner feeling unable to go on parental leave. Her words bring into question how universal this social right in fact is, as decisions on how to divide social rights to caregiving like parental leave are not made in isolation; they are shaped by factors such as how employers are likely to react. Parental leave benefits constitute an example where coupled parents can lose out financially if they do not share the leave according to policy stipulations.

A much wider array of consequences tied to being expected by policy to collaborate with known but disengaged fathers took centre stage in the single mother-only focus group. Single mothers placed great emphasis on the emotional, practical, and financial burdens added by being expected to collaborate with fathers who showed little interest in and took minimal responsibility for their children. Sanna, for instance, was critical of the fact that the Swedish Social Insurance Agency did not intervene in situations like hers, where joint legal custody was coupled with collaborative difficulties.

Anna and Eva explained that the fathers of their children had failed to pay child support despite having made informal agreements to do so. Once Eva had given up on trying to maintain a positive relationship between son and father, she had turned to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to get child maintenance paid via them, instead of the default arrangement whereby private child support agreements are made between parents. Following this, Eva said that her son's father had repeatedly hassled her to have the payments lifted, as the other parent is still liable to reimburse child maintenance costs to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

While there are rarely checks to ensure that parents with joint legal custody share parenting responsibilities equally, family policies are increasingly being tailored to parents who share care equally. Anna's and Eva's experiences can be seen as part of a parallel trend whereby parents are increasingly expected to make private custody agreements and payments. As noted in the Swedish context section, the Swedish state no longer acts as an intermediary to organise child support payments unless special circumstances can be shown, and the child benefit has been split automatically between parents with joint legal custody since 2014. This can have financial consequences for single mothers when the default policy arrangements assume that parents take equal responsibility for their children. Anna said:

> Shared custody, but, what does that actually mean, that I didn't get child support, I didn't get help with anything, then this amazing [sarcastic tone] law was passed which meant that he got half the child benefit, even though he wasn't taking care of him. I had to do it myself, that is, everything.

For Anna, the notion of joint custody appeared as somewhat of an illusion, as it meant she lost out on income tied to parenting responsibilities, even though her son's father had only had a haphazard presence in his life. Several single mothers described how, even though their children lived with them all of the time, the father either did not pay child support or paid substantially less than half of what it cost to bring up a child.

Nadine, who at the time of divorcing had a two- and a four-year-old, had seen no other option but to resign from her permanent employment contract as she would no longer be able to combine looking after her children with working evening and weekend shifts. While she was firmly convinced that love comes first and money second, she revealed that the situation had been very tough financially since the divorce and that the money sometimes ran out before the end of the month. Social services had awarded her and the children's father equal joint physical custody of the children, with the two of them receiving half of the child benefit each. As she disclosed this to the group, the following exchange took place:

> Nadine: Even [though] I pay extra everything, he [children's father] doesn't pay, not even the child benefit. But I don't want to quarrel.
>
> Camilla: Yes, but you can call the Social Insurance Agency and claim, you can demand…
>
> Anna: She has to prove it and that's the problem. They're getting stricter and stricter.
>
> Camilla: We have to prove…
>
> Anna: It's enough that the dad says, "No, I'm paying for waterproof coats and pants with this money."
>
> Nadine: The father says, "If they want, they can come [stay with me]", he's said [so] before … and I do everything. It's unfair. Now that I don't even have a job.

Their exchange illustrates various complexities that can arise when benefits presume equal sharing of financial responsibilities between parents. On the one hand, as Camilla was quick to advise, it is possible to challenge the default arrangement. In Anna's eyes, however, doing so would not be a fail-safe route, as parents then either need to agree on or be able to show that their version of the story is true, which she thought the Social Insurance Agency was becoming increasingly strict about. As Nadine then articulated, despite lacking employment and having money difficulties, she would not challenge the current arrangement as she wanted to avoid quarrelling with the children's father. For her, it was not the lack of formal routes, but rather

the desire to keep good relations with the father, that discouraged her from challenging the default arrangement.

While some policies are being tailored to gender-equal sharing, single mothers also discussed a policy that does not assume gender-equal sharing, but that equally does not compensate for its absence. In Sweden, employed parents are entitled to paid leave (80% of salary) to care for sick children. Eriksson and Kolk (2024) have shown that on average, single fathers today take more such care leave from work than before splitting up. In contrast, some single mothers in this study reported that the father of their children had never taken a day of such leave of absence. This leave of absence is a social right, but both single and coupled parents expressed that being perceived as "the one who always stays home with sick children" is not beneficial in the workplace and impacts career prospects and future pension entitlements. This policy does not require parents to divide responsibilities in a specific way, but it also does not provide any compensation when one parent takes all the leave. Whilst not a dual-earner-dual-carer policy per se, such lack of compensation sets single mothers behind in relative financial and career terms when they cannot share responsibilities with the father and equally do not benefit from the father's resources.

At the time of the interview, Jessica was on her third period of stress-related sick leave in six months. Her two teenage children suffered from mental health problems and required a lot of support, especially since having stopped going to school. Logically, a caregiver's 20% cut in earnings has a bigger impact in a single-earner household than in a dual-earner household. Despite still feeling unwell, Jessica explained that she kept returning to work for economic reasons: "I can't afford to be sick."

Although the focus group interviews were generally characterised by agreement between participants, a point at which opinions diverged was when it came to how the state should deal with disengaged fathers. While a few mothers revealed stark frustration due to having no means of forcing fathers to make use of their visiting rights, Eva noted:

> I would've liked it the other way around, that I could have told my son's father "just stay away, because you do more harm than good". He's chosen not to be in touch with his son, say for six months, fine, stay away then. … I have no legal right [as a sole guardian] to say, "stay away", because then he can sue me for custody.

Like Eva, several mothers expressed feeling defeated about their inability to protect children from seeing their fathers when they felt such contact was disadvantageous for the children. Some made mention of the emotional work involved in consoling children when their fathers cancelled on them or failed to show up to planned visitations. Several mothers feared they would be accused of sabotaging the father's visiting rights if they did not comply. Having to "hunt down" disengaged fathers for signatures on forms was yet another challenge faced by mothers with joint legal custody.

The low-resourced single mothers in this study faced various emotional, practical, and economic consequences related to being expected by policy to collaborate with disengaged fathers. These

policies are not designed solely to enable gender-equal parenting, but arguably they assume gender-equal parenting in such a way that single mothers who do not share responsibilities equally and feel unable to challenge default arrangements lose out economically, practically, and emotionally. Issues ranged from practical burdens of having to chase up disengaged fathers and feeling unable to protect children from harmful contact, to financial losses stemming from policies that either assume shared parenting arrangements (child benefit, child support) and do not compensate for their absence (leave to take care of sick children). Taken together, these accounts point to several ways full-time, low-resourced single mothers are penalised when policies are not sensitive to their needs.

The Under-Recognised Vulnerabilities of Single Parenting

Related to the gendered lack of division of labour faced by many single mothers in this study, they also expressed feeling that society and the welfare state under-recognised vulnerabilities associated with single parenting. As Caroline put it, in their efforts to be inclusive, people around her sometimes contributed to obscuring such challenges: "When you bring it up to people, they just go, 'Nooo, there's nothing weird about being a single parent, there's so many who are, there's nothing weird about that' so you never get that acknowledgement either." Single mothers described a lack of awareness from others when it came to societal expectations to contribute as much as two-parent families, a lack of understanding of the pressures tied to being expected to perform like two-parent families, and a lack of support structures that compensate for their vulnerabilities.

Amanda toyed with the idea that single parenting may be especially difficult in Sweden, as there is a societal expectation that parents will manage independently. Sweden of course has a comprehensive family policy package to support families. Still, several single mothers in this study lacked social support networks to turn to when family benefits and services proved insufficient. Many single mothers voiced that they felt expected by schools and other parents to contribute as much to their children and communities as parents in two-parent families. Such expectations included contributing as much as two-parent families when buying gifts for teachers at the end of the school year, not leaving their children for "too long" at preschool, having time to listen to their children and help them with homework, or helping collect money for school trips.

Although such contributions may seem trivial, they can put a lot of additional pressure on those with limited resources. Anna recalled the panic she had felt when her son was expected to bring a piece of fruit to school every day, as this was incompatible with her budget. Many mothers gave examples of what they felt were sly or snarky comments from preschool staff, family members, or other children's parents about their deficiencies as mothers. Eva said she had felt very vulnerable when asked to pick up her child earlier from preschool:

> My son was the one who was left first and picked up last [from preschool], and the staff were a bit like, "Oh, isn't it time you start reducing your hours now, it's very long days [for the child]?" "Oh, yeah, I can't do much about it."

Although coupled mothers also expressed feeling ashamed when they could not give their children things other children were believed to have, and felt a strong social expectation to pick their children up from preschool at the "right" time, they typically did not offer examples of when other parents or preschool staff had challenged or expressed disapproval of their parenting practices. Perhaps they would have if asked; there was no direct question about other people's reactions in the interview guide, but single mothers like Eva disclosed a range of such experiences unprompted.

Whereas a few single mothers had family members who had explicitly said it was not their responsibility, but rather the father's or the welfare state's, to help out when things got tough, most seemed to think such expectations and comments stemmed from a lack of knowledge and understanding for what single parenting entails unless you have yourself experienced it. Amanda continued, suggesting this under-recognition of what single parenting means in practice was underpinned by the lack of representation of low-resourced single mothers in the media, which she felt focused on nuclear families with two children:

> Often when you see comparative studies and such, on the news, then it's often about two-child families. Occasionally, single parents, but then, they're only single parents living in a small apartment or something similar. I'm a full-time single mother, on sick leave, and without assistance, and I feel like I don't fit into any examples they have. … It feels like you're excluded when you belong to this category. It's like they've given up on you and you aren't considered important.

This sense of being forgotten as the sole carer for their children was also echoed by several single mothers who expressed a sense of fear due to the lack of safety net in place in the event that they would suffer from severe illness or death. For instance, Elvira recalled a time when she had required emergency healthcare and the ambulance staff had proceeded to ring on various neighbours' doors to find someone to take care of her son. One neighbour had phoned social services, and as Elvira recalled having been told "They just [said], 'Doesn't she have any parents?', 'No,' 'She doesn't have anyone?', 'No, a hundred percent custody.' I just wanted to highlight that, that there is no safety net." Elvira's understanding was that there had been no safety net in place, but rather an implicit assumption that the other parent or another family member would be able to take care of her son at short notice.

Eva had attempted to improve her and her son's situation by returning to school and described nurse training as the "three worst years of my life", as she received "no rights whatsoever as a single parent, all internships were a hundred percent compulsory attendance, didn't matter if it was night shifts, evening shifts, it was like, I just had to get on with it." Although Swedish municipalities must strive to provide childcare during non-standard hours (evenings, nights, and weekends) if the parents' work situations require it, there is no formal entitlement to childcare during such hours, and there was a mixed response from parents in this study as to how available such childcare services were.

In addition to this lack of recognition and support in special circumstances, such as emergency illness or a return to formal education, single mothers felt under-recognised for the additional

care burdens they faced in everyday life. An illustrative example of this lack of support was offered by several single mothers of children with additional support needs who had reached out to social services to ask for respite care, to which the response had been that their circumstances were not dire enough to qualify for support. Camilla, whose three children had additional support needs, recalled the lack of support and understanding she had met when insisting on her need for respite from social services:

> Early on, I wanted the school to report us to the social services, because I wanted help, I needed help, I needed respite. I need help with the situation, three children and a father who had disappeared. They just [said], "No, the kids are so safe and everything works so well with them." … I've insisted on being reported to the social services, like, for our family to get help. And like pounded on social services' [door], but they haven't helped. … They think that I'm too good a parent. They say, "Yeah, we don't get how you've managed, most people would collapse in your situation", and I *have* collapsed at social services.

Camilla's experience was that the response from social services was focused on the needs of her children, applauding her for managing a situation most people would collapse in, while disregarding her call for help in what she felt was an unsustainable situation. This failure to access support when the children seem, in the eyes of social services, to be doing fine was echoed by Caroline, who simultaneously highlighted how asking for help needs to be balanced carefully with not "having too many problems according to social services", as you then risk having your children taken away from you.

Jessica had been reported to social services on several occasions. She was open about not always having the energy to take as good care of her children and home as she would have liked or to make sure the financials were in place. She found it difficult to understand that her family was still waiting to receive any form of support, despite having spent years calling various authorities asking for help. Amanda had gained access to a contact family with whom her son could spend one night per month, but explained that the support was so negligible that it made virtually no difference to either her or her son. There appears to be a lack of recognition from social services and the welfare state of the pressures tied to the care burden shouldered by these single mothers, illustrated by the sole focus on children's wellbeing, and the lack of adequate support that would make a substantial difference to these families.

Together, these findings suggest that single mothers face an under-recognition of the vulnerability inherent to (near) full-time single parenting, while they simultaneously felt expected to do as much for their children and their communities as two-parent families. Their accounts indicated a felt lack of support structures to support them when they fall ill, when they try to improve their circumstances, or when they feel they no longer have more reserves to draw on.

Discussion

This study has sought to answer how low-resourced single mothers fare in a context where gender equality is pursued by focusing on supporting dual-earner-dual-carer families. The dual-earner-dual-carer ideal is gaining an increasingly firm foothold in Europe. This study used Sweden as a case to understand how a one-size-fits-all policy focus on enabling dual-earner-dual-carer families shapes the everyday circumstances and experiences of low-resourced single mothers in particular. Hobson and Takahashi (1997) suggested nearly thirty years ago that single parents in Sweden were at risk of having their needs and circumstances obscured as they were subsumed into the policy framework for working parents. Since then, single parents have become increasingly encouraged and expected by policy to share parenting responsibilities equally. For many separated parents, a more equal sharing of responsibilities has become a reality (Eriksson and Kolk 2024).

However, the findings indicate that, compared to coupled parents, low-resourced single mothers face several disadvantages in the Swedish dual-earner-dual-carer context. Swedish social policies are increasingly pushing a perceived equal division of parenting on single parents, but in reality, the division can be highly unequal. This leads to under-recognised vulnerabilities among single mothers with a gendered lack of division of labour in particular. In line with previous research (Grönlund and Javornik 2014; Roman 2017), this study has shown that both coupled and single parents can find it difficult to reconcile paid work and caregiving responsibilities in the Swedish dual-earner-dual-carer context. In addition, I have highlighted ways in which low-resourced single mothers are at risk of becoming especially disadvantaged as parents have become increasingly expected to share caregiving responsibilities equally.

The findings add nuance to recent research which argues that separated parents are now driving rather than stalling the gender revolution (Eriksson and Kolk 2024), by suggesting that some single parents do not have the option to be forerunners of the gender revolution. Swedish work-family policies have been successful at inducing gender equal sharing in many dual-earner-dual-carer families (Esping-Andersen 2016), and many single parents are now able to follow suit. In contrast, my findings suggest that the experiences of low-resourced single mothers may be better characterised by gender inequality. This gender inequality appears to be exacerbated by policies that aim to have the opposite effect. This is a salient insight because it allows us to highlight that, while many single parents are enjoying an increasing amount of gender-equal parenting, single mothers who take on most parenting responsibilities may be at risk of being penalised by current gender equality measures.

While the Gender Revolution Framework has primarily focused on the advantages of the spreading of gender-equal-sharing of parenting, I argue that we must pay greater attention to how parents who do *not* share parenting gender equally fare in the stratified and incomplete gender revolution, especially when policies are designed to underpin it. In reverse of the general trend whereby separated fathers are becoming increasingly involved in their children's lives (Eriksson and Kolk 2024; Hakovirta et al. 2023; Statistics Sweden 2023), the low-resourced single mothers in this study faced various practical, emotional, and economic consequences related to being expected by policy to collaborate with disengaged fathers. These policies are not only designed to enable gender-equal parenting, but they assume gender-equal parenting in such a way that those who do not share gender equally but feel unable to challenge default arrangements lose out economically. Reported issues ranged from the practical burdens of having to chase up disengaged fathers and being unable to protect children from harmful contact, to financial losses stemming from policies that either assume shared parenting arrangements and do not compensate for its absence. A distinction can be made between policies that set single mothers behind in relative terms, for instance when they are the only parent taking a leave of absence to care for sick children, and dual-earner-dual-carer policies that cause financial losses because they assume shared parenting. But they both contribute to the loss of income important to low-resourced single mothers. Combined with the trade-offs faced by low-resourced single mothers with a gendered lack of division of labour and a societal under-recognition of vulnerabilities tied to single parenting, these findings point to several ways full-time single mothers are penalised when policies are not sensitive to their needs.

A strength of the focus group method is that it allows participants to discuss experiences in a context with others facing similar challenges (Kitzinger 1994), and because it gives insight into what topics people are aware of and consider appropriate to share in a semi-public context (Hollander 2004; Smithson 2000). Of particular interest are the single mother-specific issues that were almost exclusively raised in the single mother-only focus group, such as the practical and financial burdens related to being expected to co-parent with a disengaged father. Potentially, such issues are felt too controversial to share with others who are not in a similar situation. In this article, I have paid special attention to issues low-resourced single mothers face in a dual-earner-dual-carer context. However, the fact that topics were not mentioned cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that they are of unimportance to participants (Hollander 2004). My intention with this study is not to say that low-resourced coupled parents do not experience difficulties in a dual-earner-dual-carer context like Sweden, but rather, to shed light on where the dual-earner-dual-carer logic and its focus on gender-equal parenting may introduce additional barriers and consequences for single mothers.

By comparing low-resourced single mothers to low-resourced coupled parents, I was able to tease out where their experiences and opportunities differed. A strength of the study is its ability to focus on low-resourced single mothers, as we know that socioeconomically disadvantaged parents share family responsibilities less gender-equally (Duvander et al. 2015; Esping-Andersen 2016), and shed light on mechanisms that may aggravate their situation. A related limitation of the study is that we do not know how social policies work for the increasingly diverse group involved in single parenting in Sweden today. Although it is still common for children to live

mostly or only with their mothers, it is also very common for single parents in Sweden to have joint physical custody (Hakovirta et al. 2023; Statistics Sweden 2023). Given that I have only focused on low-resourced single mothers who in practice shoulder almost all responsibilities, the findings cannot be theoretically generalised to single parents who practise equal joint physical custody, widowed single parents, well-resourced single parents, and/or single fathers. Future research should explore if and how experiences and opportunities differ across the group. This would allow for establishing how policies could be improved to ensure that all single parents – irrespective of their living situations and co-parenting arrangements – can combine resources and family needs in an adequate way.

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