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PUBLIC VERSION FINAL REPORT

Share Power and University College Maastricht

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# Overview Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create support groups for single mothers to come together.

Sub-recommendation 1.1: Identify a qualified community member to assist with group facilitation.

Sub-recommendation 1.2: Leave room for the participants to choose their own themes and structure.

Sub-recommendation 1.3: Hold meetings at easily accessible locations, possibly online.

Sub-recommendation 1.4: Start meetings with a fun activity or group building exercise to build a trusting and friendly space.

Recommendation 2: Support workshops for administrative burdens.

Sub-recommendation 2.1: These should be led by an experience expert who is a single mother themself.

*Sub-recommendation 2.1.1*: Possibly have a government official provide additional support.

Sub-recommendation 2.2: The training should provide information on all possible government assistance and how to apply.

Sub-recommendation 2.3: The trainer(s) should be trained on handling sensitive financial conversations.

Recommendation 3: Support for reentering the workforce.

Sub-recommendation 3.1: Create workshops to help single mothers discover their professional interests and dreams.

Sub-recommendation 3.2: Create workshops to help single mothers improve their skills for reentering the workforce.

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| General Attitude  Create a more inclusive and accessible environment by focusing on language, price and location of SharePower’s services. |

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# Introduction

According to the CBS, the Dutch cities with the highest prevalence of single-parent families are Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Heerlen. In Limburg, one out of four children are raised by a single parent. Single mothers face many barriers when it comes to equality (Damaske & Knotter, 2017). As a Think Tank group, we have been requested to provide advice to SharePower, a societal organization that currently focuses on women's equality in Limburg. They wish to broaden their scope to include single mothers. The stakeholders in this process are single mothers, Limburg companies, NGOs, the government, the inner circle, and childcare services. To research this problem, this report will answer the question: **“How can SharePower help single mothers (above the age of 20) to be fully integrated in Limburgish society?”**. Keep into consideration that this is the public version, which is a short summary of a more detailed final report.

# Theoretical framework

SharePower’s motto “for a Limburg with equal rights for everyone, especially women” assumes that gender inequality pertains in society. A society that, through a feminist lens, is patriarchal at its core. The fact that single mothers defy conventional family structures means that they continue to be disadvantaged. However, feminism assigns a position in society based solely on the sex distinction, which is a very limited approach. People are impacted by multiple structures; for instance, race, class, and social status. As a result, an intersectional feminist lens must be used. It is only possible to attempt to represent a larger pool of single mothers if all of their various identities are taken into consideration. It is critical to consider how the intersections between mother's status, gender, race, or age will affect her experience.

# Methodology

Firstly, we were interested in the broader demographics of single mothers. We needed to gather quantitative data from all around Limburg. Thus, we built upon prior research by conducting a literature review that dives into the broader context of single mothers. In addition, we conducted a comparative analysis in which we compared SharePower to several comparative NGOs, both Limburgish and international. By researching other NGO strategies, we aimed to find out what strategies SharePower could apply to help single mothers in Limburg. Furthermore, in addition to the literature review, we were interested in the individual experiences and challenges of single mothers in Limburg (Almaki, 2016). For this part of our research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five single mothers in Limburg. We performed a thematic analysis with the results of these interviews, and constructed themes about the experiences of the single mothers (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017).

# Findings

We carried out this methodology and found the following findings from each method. This section contains short summaries of each section, for further elaboration see the full report.

Literature Review

Single mothers are at a socially disadvantaged position and face greater levels of psychological distress which impacts their mental health and makes them more likely to face depressive episodes (Avison et al., 2007; Davies et al., 1997; Jackson et al., 2008). Their poor mental health is caused by two factors, which are applicable to more families but strongly intensify for single mothers (Cairney et al., 1999). Firstly, single mothers are the primary earners and caregivers, which can lead to stress and economic struggle (Eamon & Wu, 2011). Secondly, single mothers continuously feel the need to compromise their own needs and goals to provide for their child (Quinn & Allen, 1989).

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis considers two international NGO’s, Single Mothers Outreach” (SMO) in California and the “Single Parent Project” (SPP) in Utah, and two local NGO’s, Droommoeders” and “Single SuperMothers” in Maastricht. Based on this analysis we found that the best programs in these NGO’s focused on two elements. Firstly, the implementation of support groups have consistently been shown to establish a sense of community (Single Mothers Outreach, n.d.). Single mothers learn from other single mothers, reduce mental health issues, and improve family communication and stability. Secondly, the reintegration into the workforce through workshops and other programs focusing on finance management, skills training, and career advice were also highly successful (Tillie, 2019).

Interviews

By analyzing the interviews with the thematic analysis, we found six themes that summarize the experiences of single mothers. The first theme is a support network, which includes the participants’ personal relationships and people the single mothers can count on for support. Secondly, perceptions of the societal stigma around single motherhood were an important theme. The third theme is the duality of independence, which refers to the trade off between freedom and responsibility. Fourthly, the interviewees expressed that they heavily struggled with the financial aspect of being a single mother. The fifth theme was the difficult work and time management that single mothers have to balance. Lastly, most of our participants mentioned some mental health issues related to or resulting from single motherhood. For a more detailed description of every theme, see the full report.

# Recommendations

From these three types of findings, we formulated three types of programs we recommend SharePower to execute to help single mothers.

1. Support Groups

The first recommendation we make to SharePower is to start a support group for single mothers in Limburg. As noted from the thematic analysis, most of the interviewed mothers attributed great importance to a support network to rely on. The participants who did not feel satisfied with their current social network, expressed a clear desire to join a group of women who are facing similar problems in which they could support each other. This need for support and a social network is also something we consistently found during our literature review. We found that other organizations, such as SMO and SPP, offer support groups to single parents and their children to alleviate emotional discomfort and mental health issues (Single Mothers Outreach, n.d.).

SharePower must consider the following elements when choosing how to implement the support groups. What is the support group's purpose? Possible purposes include offering social, educational, and mental health assistance. Additionally, it is important to consider the structure of the meetings and who will facilitate them. We would suggest implementing an informal support group with a trained facilitator. In addition, during our interviews, participants said that they would value hearing the experiences of an expert on single motherhood. Furthermore, from our literature review and thematic analysis, we learned that single mothers struggle with time management. Therefore, we suggest holding the group meetings in the evening and at easily accessible locations, or even online. Furthermore, the size of the group is important to consider. We would recommend small groups, since similar support groups in the past have used a size between 3 and 12 participants with success (Oygard, 2004). Lastly, According to Mental Health America’s guide (2016), open communication and setting boundaries are crucial for effective support groups. To do so, it might be beneficial to clarify confidentiality so that everyone has the same knowledge about their privacy. To create a friendly environment, the meeting could start with a fun activity such as a group building exercise.

1. Administrative Support

We found in the interviews that single mothers struggled with the complexity of the governmental help system. More specifically, they had difficulties with understanding two different processes: 1) how to apply for extra subsidies and programs from the government, and 2) whether they were eligible for these programs. Because of this feeling, some of them felt like they were missing a part of the available support. Single mothers are both the main caregivers and source of income, and thus, they need financial support from the government. However, we found that they have difficulty navigating the different types of subsidies available. This is especially the case for single mothers lacking a social network (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Ciabattari, 2007).

SharePower could create a program that would help single mothers to navigate the administrative subsidy system. An element that came up throughout the interviews is that single mothers want an expert to guide them in this process. This expert could explain which subsidies single mothers are eligible for and how to apply for them. Furthermore, they could also help mothers with the legal lingo that they sometimes need to understand to file these forms (Kræmmergaard & Madsen, 2016). Also, it is crucial to prioritize new single mothers for these workshops, as they are the ones who still need the most information. It is important to consider the mothers’ sensitivity as they might experience difficult financial situations and feel shame about it. The expert giving the workshop should also receive training to make these women comfortable. SharePower should aim for these workshops to be given once or twice a year in the evening to reach single mothers effectively.

1. Support for Reentering the Workforce

We believe that the third goal of an organization like SharePower is to provide single mothers with tools to reenter the workforce. Women have a harder time reentering the workforce after having a baby due to the patriarchy and the current role of women in our society (European Commission, 2015). We suggest this recommendation as many of the single mothers we interviewed explained that they struggled with work or to come back to work after having children. Having a job means more flexibility, less financial-related stress, and is related to the theme of independence. The NGO’s we examined also stressed the importance of belonging to the workforce. The “DroomMoeders” program is a good example of this: they provide a two-year coaching program for single mothers to get back to work and to manage their finances better (Tillie, 2013). Furthermore, this recommendation is also supported by literature. After childbirth, women are seen as unreliable for employers due to the expectation that the former will care for their child to the fullest extent (Beechy, 1979). Research shows there should be more of an emphasis on “returnships”, and on the strategies single mothers can use to do so (Lipman, 2019).

Thus, SharePower should create a program for single mothers who struggle to find their place in the workforce. They should play the role of a job orientation team, as SMO did (Single SuperMom, 2018). They could also provide targeted workshops to discover first single mothers’ professional interests and dreams, and secondly, to help evolve their skills. Examples of these training can be “How to find your passion?”, “How to create a good CV?”, “How to find further education that fits you?”, and “How to prepare for a job interview?” (Monash Student Association, n.d.). We recommend that this program will last a year and that it will include four workshops: two focusing on job orientation, and two for skills training.

# General Attitude to Keep in Mind

SharePower is currently trying to broaden their approach to reach more women with their programs. In this regard, we must keep in mind that to include all single mothers Inclusiveness is a key value that the organization must embody and it implies that people from all sections of society are included (Oxford Learning Dictionary, n.d.). This principle is also closely linked to the need for accessibility, which refers to the ways to promote open and available services to all (Jones, 1981). As we understand it, SharePower's current approach to reaching out to women attracts mostly women from a higher socioeconomic background, due to the price and topics of their workshops. This strategy is not in line with the ambition to reach all single mothers in Limburg, and thus could be improved upon.

Firstly, we established that a significant part of single mothers faces financial challenges. To make their services accessible to single mothers, we advise SharePower to lower the prices of their workshops. Furthermore, in Limburg, more than five percent of all people do not speak Dutch or Limburgish at home (CBS, 2021). The second suggestion is thus to target women from a non-Dutch background as well. We suggest that SharePower provides the option to translate their website to English and provide English products (such as workshops and pamphlets). Thirdly, inclusiveness can be further promoted by increasing accessibility. SharePower often provides their services in Roermond. However, a significant part of single mothers in Limburg does not have the time and/or resources to come to Roermond. Therefore, we suggest broadening this scope and providing services online and in other cities.

# Suggestions for Further Research

Creating surveys or conducting further interviews are two possible forms of research that can be conducted in the future to learn more about single mothers in Limburg. The first option is especially useful when it comes to gathering larger data and collecting data on the wider public opinion. It can provide SharePower with a much clearer picture of what they should focus on, and how Limburg compares to general research. Furthermore, we believe that the organization should continue conducting more interviews with single mothers and experts. We recommend that SharePower will conduct interviews with experts on the topic because they too have many insights on this topic. Lastly, because we struggled with finding relevant and recently published research on the topic of single mothers in Limburg, we recommend that a more in-depth literature review be conducted. If there is a research gap, research on the topic could raise awareness about this and motivate more researchers.

# Conclusion

This report set out to answer the question: **“How can SharePower help single mothers (above the age of 20) to be fully integrated in Limburgish society?”**. We first conducted a problem analysis to understand the client and the problem, formulated a theoretical framework and established a methodology. Then, the University College Maastricht Think Tank group has conducted a literature review, a comparative analysis and interviews. We have bundled these findings into recommendations that include three types of support: support groups, administrative education, and support for re-entering the workforce. Furthermore, we also propose a general attitude that refers to inclusivity and accessibility. Lastly, we provide SharePower with suggestions for further research. We hope that with these results SharePower can broaden their scope and help single mothers. Because with every little step, the difficulties of single mother’s fade, and their lives improve.

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