

WOMEN LIVING ALONE AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN GERMANY: RESULTS OF A SYSTEMATIC SECONDARY ANALYSIS

Burcu Köse, & Stefan Kohlhof

*Department of Vocational Education and Vocational Training Research,
University Duisburg-Essen (Germany)*

Abstract

Germany's social structure is diverse, yet minorities like women living alone are often overlooked. Research mostly focuses on an older woman; middle-aged groups are underrepresented though their numbers are rising. Data are frequently outdated. Work and education and their interrelations have not been integrative analysed, leaving links between living alone, challenges, resources and educational and work trajectories unclear. The aim of this secondary literature analysis is to systematically summarise available findings on the connection between living alone and the associated areas of life – with a particular focus on vocational training for women – and to derive key requirements for action. The study identifies differentiated relationships, such as those between living alone, participation in education and employment history, and highlights potential barriers. A systematic secondary literature analysis was conducted in German-speaking countries. Relevant studies were identified via databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined, and a thematic synthesis of the findings was carried out. In this context, women living alone are defined as persons living in a single-person household; the marital status of the person concerned is irrelevant. The analysis covers publications from the German-speaking context that deal explicitly with vocational training, adult education or continuing education measures and take into account the life status of 'living alone'. The findings show that there is no significant relationship between 'women living alone' and 'vocational training' or 'labour force participation'. Instead, the findings focus predominantly on the disadvantages faced by this target group, with the research adopting an intersectional or integrative approach to this sample. Women living alone are frequently associated with the category of 'long-term unemployment'. The realities of life for the target group show that they are often characterised by unstable employment histories and a poor match between existing skills and labour market requirements, health restrictions with an impact on resilience, motivation and everyday organisation, social isolation or fragile networks, which make it difficult to convert resources into participation, material insecurity and limited pension options, and biographical breaks that limit planning horizons and make transitions risky. At the political level, financial support services should be created in particular to better integrate women living alone into vocational training pathways. Future research could focus on further institutional prevention and intervention measures that include counselling services for women living alone. This would allow for a more informed understanding of their participation in working life, educational processes and employment trajectories, and enable implications to be drawn.

Keywords: *Women, living alone, secondary analysis, vocational training.*

1. Introduction

Women living alone constitute an increasingly diverse and growing demographic group in Germany. Their situation is characterised by individualised lifestyles and specific social and structural conditions (Federal Statistical Office, 2024). In the literature, women living alone have predominantly been addressed in old age, while studies on younger and middle-aged groups are less common (Nikelski & Nauerth, 2018). However, it is becoming increasingly common for women, particularly in middle age, to live alone (Bauereiss & Bayer, 1995). It is difficult to categorise this group within existing definitional constructs, and more research is needed on the living conditions, lifestyle choices and social participation of this group. Furthermore, as this population is heterogeneous (Federal Statistical Office, 2024), existing evidence on women living alone is often based on outdated data (cf. Alisch, 1993; Jürgensen, 1990) and research focusing on this group is lacking (Achatz & Trapmann, 2011).

2. Design

This review focuses on a systematic analysis of the current state of research on women living alone. Particular attention is focused on statistics, defining criteria and the relationship between educational and employment backgrounds.

Specific research questions include:

- 1.) What are the findings regarding the prevalence and demographic characteristics of women living alone?
- 2.) What are the intersectional patterns and risks?
- 3.) What specific aspects characterise the vocational training of this target group?

3. Objectives

This secondary literature analysis aims to systematically summarise the available findings on the connection between living alone and other areas of life, with a particular focus on vocational training for women, and identify key practical steps. The study identifies various relationships, such as those between living alone, participation in education, and employment history, and highlights potential barriers.

4. Methods

The study is based on a systematic secondary literature in the German-speaking context. It focuses on vocational, adult and continuing education, explicitly considering the life status of living alone.

4.1. Database

A systematic literature review was carried out to answer the research question (Wetterich & Plänitz, 2021). This method aims to record and evaluate the current state of research in a structured, transparent and comprehensible manner. Firstly, a comprehensive literature search was conducted in the Google Scholar, BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine) and SSOAR (Social Science Open Access Repository) databases. As the field of study has a strong quantitative dimension, the analysis incorporated relevant statistical reports and data analyses alongside academic publications (Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office], Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [Federal Agency for Civic Education]). The search was conducted using the keywords 'women living alone', 'vocational training' and 'labour force participation'. The study period was limited to the years 2015–2026 to take current research findings into account. Only German-language publications were included. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined in advance to ensure the relevance of the content (4.2.).

4.2. Definition and delimitation of key terms

The term 'women living alone' is not always defined consistently in the literature. In specialist literature, other terms are sometimes used synonymously or are not clearly distinguished from one another (Federal Agency for Civic Education, 2021, 2024). According to the Federal Statistical Office (2026a, n.p.), people living alone are defined as those living in a single-person household, regardless of their marital status. People living alone thus constitute a subgroup of 'single people' (ibid.).

For the purposes of this study, only those studies that explicitly refer to women living alone—in the sense of single-person households—are taken into account. Studies on single parents or single people in the broader sense are excluded unless a separate analysis for women living alone is provided.

4.3. Procedure

Only empirical studies that examined the relationship between women living alone and vocational training were included. The relevant studies were selected. First, the relevant results were screened on the basis of their titles and abstracts. Then, potentially suitable findings were subjected to a full-text analysis. Studies that met the specified criteria were included in the final analysis. The selected literature was evaluated using a structured content analysis. To this end, key categories were established, including vocational training and labour force participation. The results of the studies were systematically recorded, compared and analysed in terms of their similarities and differences. Finally, the findings were synthesised to identify overarching patterns, key influencing factors and existing research gaps. To ensure the transparency of the selection process, it was documented in accordance with established standards for systematic reviews.

5. Results

This section presents the results of the analyses. First, it describes the prevalence and demographic characteristics of individuals living alone. Next, the relationship between vocational training and living alone among women is examined.

5.1. Prevalence and demographic characteristics

5.1.1. Age-related prevalence. According to data from the Federal Statistical Office (2026 b, c), 1,220,000 people aged 18–25 were living alone in 2024, including 590,000 women. In the 25–45 age group, 4,778,000 people were living alone, including 1,683,000 women. Fewer people living alone were recorded in the 65–85 age group than in the younger age groups, although the number of women living alone was higher here. Finally, 1,092,000 women lived alone in the 85-and-over age group.

5.1.2. Regional differences. In 1996, a total of 12.7 million people in Germany lived alone (Federal Agency for Civic Education, 2021). An analysis of the proportion of women living alone reveals significant differences between the federal states. The highest absolute figures were found in the populous federal states of Baden-Württemberg (around 1.1 million women) and Bavaria (around 1.4 million women), while significantly lower figures were found in smaller federal states, i.e. regions with fewer inhabitants. These include Bremen (87,000 women), Saarland (108,000 women), and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (175,000 women).

5.1.3. Marital status. Some recent findings regarding marital status have also emerged (Federal Agency for Civic Education, 2021, 2024): 32.1% of women living alone are single; 8.5% are divorced, 4.9% are widowed, 3.4% are married but living apart.

5.2. Intersectional pattern and risks

There are isolated statistical analyses that shed light on individual socio-economic characteristics, but these also fail to make a consistent distinction (Stich, 2001). Only studies that adopt an intersectional perspective provide a deeper insight into the circumstances of women living alone. These studies show that specific problems arise, particularly in the context of long-term unemployment. These include, amongst other things, disruptions in life trajectories, mental health issues and cumulative social disadvantages (Kohlhof, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). The findings illustrate that various dimensions are interwoven – such as employment status, living arrangements, dis/ability and gender – often accompanied by social isolation and health factors, which contributes to worsening precarious living conditions.

5.3. Interdependence between vocational training and women living alone

With regard to vocational training and labour market participation, the sources analysed suggest that women living alone constitute a heterogeneous group. Although the available studies provide insights into patterns of employment, there is often no systematic distinction made from other household types, which limits their significance. There are a few isolated findings that provide some insight into this issue, though they are also rather ambiguous: Women under the age of 64 living alone were more likely to have completed secondary education, whilst men were more likely to have a university degree. The labour force participation rate among women was generally high, particularly for full-time work. Professionally, they were particularly well represented in creative, commercial and social sectors, whilst technical and highly specialised occupations were less common (Alisch, 1993). Although the vast majority of women living alone have a school-leaving qualification – only 4.3% nationwide and 2.8% in eastern Germany do not (cf. Federal Statistical Office, 2024) – inequalities persist with regard to higher education qualifications and vocational qualifications. Compared to the general population, women living alone have a lower proportion of university entrance qualifications and vocational qualifications, which contrasts with the findings of Alisch (1993) (Federal Statistical Office, 2024). In eastern Germany, the average level of educational attainment among single women is slightly higher, but this is attributable to the educational traditions that developed over time in the former GDR (Güther et al., 2004). Despite a general rise in educational attainment – for instance, the proportion of women with a secondary school leaving certificate but no vocational training fell significantly between 1996 (33%) and 2011 (17%), whilst at the same time more women obtained academic degrees or qualifications as master craftsmen or technicians (see Federal Statistical Office, 2012) – structural constraints remain evident for certain groups. In particular, highly qualified women who wish to return to work after prolonged career breaks (e.g. due to care work) encounter structural barriers. These include limited further training opportunities that are not tailored to their needs

(Wanger & Bauer, 2015), as well as a failure to update their specialist knowledge due to a lack of support structures (see Diener et al., 2013).

6. Discussion

The results show that a large and growing number of women in Germany live alone, with strong differences by age group and federal state, and with varied marital-status constellations (single, divorced, widowed, married but living apart). This demographic spread indicates that “women living alone” is not a single, homogeneous life situation. At the same time, the literature review underlying the results makes clear why the vocational-training dimension is difficult to pin down empirically: many studies do not separate women living alone from single mothers or from “single women” more generally, despite the Microcensus definition. This lack of differentiation limits what can be concluded about the specific interaction between living alone, vocational training and labour-market participation. Where an intersectional perspective is used, however, a more specific risk profile becomes visible: particularly when living alone coincides with long-term unemployment and health impairments, cumulative disadvantages emerge that are linked to disrupted biographies, mental strain, social isolation and precarious living conditions. This matches Kohlhof (2026b), who explicitly argues that long-term unemployed women with impairments living alone are an overlooked target group and that their situation is shaped by limited networks, financial insecurity and missing everyday support. In terms of education and work, the results portray women living alone as broadly labour-market integrated but unevenly positioned in the qualification and occupational structure. At the same time, the results also highlight that this evidence base is partly old and that the availability of recent research specifically on the link between living alone, gender and vocational training is limited. Therefore, Alisch (1993) can be used primarily as a reference point showing that occupational segmentation among women living alone already existed decades ago. The results further suggest that labour-market participation and full-time employment do not automatically imply fair pay or upward mobility for women living alone; comparative European patterns point to a constellation in which high employment shares among women living alone can coexist with low shares of women in leadership and persistent gender pay gaps. Kohlhof (2025) shifts the focus from employment status to employability as organisationally demanded capacities, suggesting that women living alone may be statistically integrated into the labour market while still facing structural barriers to advancement. Kohlhof (2026b) further argues that inequalities in qualifications and lifelong learning persist because reintegration in adulthood often depends less on initial vocational education than on stabilisation, coaching, and institutional support. Complementing this, Kohlhof (2026a) identifies a “knowledge–action gap,” in which difficulties translating information into concrete action limit planning and participation. Together, these perspectives indicate that vocational training and reintegration programmes for women living alone require supportive, low-threshold structures that strengthen planning capacities and sustainable labour-market participation.

7. Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that whilst the employment and educational situation of women living alone appears to have been covered in previous studies. Against the backdrop of persistent gender inequalities (Ertl, 2021), it is clear that a contemporary and nuanced examination of this group is necessary. The limited and, in some cases, outdated data also highlights a clear need for further research to gain a more nuanced understanding of the current situation (Kohlhof, 2026). This also has implications for policy-making and career guidance: More up-to-date data is needed in order to develop targeted measures to promote equality in the workplace. Career guidance services should be tailored more closely to the specific needs and characteristics of this target group.

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