

Effects of single parenting on childcare: A case of single mothers in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe

Jeofrey Mtemeri*, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This quantitative study sought to explore the effects of single parenting on childcare in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted in the study. A standardised questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. A sample of 47 single mothers residing in Masvingo urban was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were analysed through descriptive statistics. Findings of the study revealed that single mothers were labelled as having loose morals and had suffered from a mental disorder at least once before. Single mothers were moving frequently in search of better-paying jobs and cheaper accommodation. This study further revealed that children raised by single mothers did not have behavioural problems but, however, had emotional problems. The study recommended that a comprehensive study covering a wider geographical area be done to enable generalisation of results to a wider population. The study further recommended that policies that support single mothers in their endeavours to support the children be enacted.

Keywords: Single mother, childcare, Masvingo.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Jeofrey Mtemeri**, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.
E-mail address: mtemerij@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Single parenting was singled out by Mkapa (2005) as one of the conditions that cause social deviation among children in most parts of the world and Africa in particular. Children who grow up with a single parent are either over- or under-protected, a situation that affects their quality of life (Mkapa, 2005). Traditionally, children are supposed to be brought up by both parents as each of the parents has their own responsibilities when it comes to the provision of childcare. It appears that the emergence of single-parent households has now become the norm rather than the exception. In this regard, this study was motivated by the need to establish the effects of single parenting on the quality of expected childcare.

Landau and Griffiths (2007) noted that globally most families are undergoing a transition and that families with one parent are far exceeding than those with two parents. This has greatly contributed to the emergence of families with single mothers. According to Du Toit (2013), single motherhood is a growing phenomenon in South Africa, as it is in the world at large. The concept and structure of a family have changed over the last few decades and as a result, no single definition will suffice to describe or define it anymore (Du Toit, 2013).

The attention of developed countries like the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) has been attracted by the prevalence of single-mother families (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). According to the Centre for Disease Control report (2007), 1.7 million children were born to unmarried mothers, a figure that is 250% greater than the number that was reported in 1980. Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) also confirmed that data published over the last several decades in leading sociological journals indicated that these children on average will suffer significant educational and emotional disadvantages compared to children who are brought up by both parents. The children will also be less able to shoulder the burden experienced in their families, communities and country (Du Toit, 2013). As a result, they will also be likely to repeat their parents' behaviour patterns where the girls will have children out of wedlock and the boys are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour (Du Toit, 2013).

Mclanahan (2004) also reported that children who grow up with only one of their biological parents (nearly always the mother) are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times likely that they themselves will also become teen mothers, and 1.4 times likely to be idle, that is to say, they will be out of school and out of work as well when compared to children who grow up with both parents. Mclanahan (2004) goes further to state that children in one-parent families also have lower college aspirations, lower grade point averages and poorer attendance records in school. They will also have higher rates of divorce as adults. Mclanahan (2004) further noted that these patterns remain the same even after taking into consideration factors like race, parents' education, number of siblings and where they reside.

The evidence, however, does not show that family disruption is the principal cause of high school failure, poverty and delinquency. Mclanahan (2004) reported that the percentage of children who drop out of high school is 19%, and the dropout rate for children in two-parent families is 13%. This, therefore, means that the dropout rate would be only 33% lower if all families had two parents and the children currently living with a single parent had the same dropout rates as children living with two parents which is a highly improbable assumption (Mclanahan, 2004).

Similar patterns have been found in Sub-Saharan African countries. This is evident in the Demographic and Health Surveys data in some Sub-Saharan African countries on children's living arrangements. According to Dlamini (2006), the proportion of children living in female-headed families differs depending on countries, for example, Nigeria (10.1%), Uganda (16.9%), Tanzania (17.3%), Zambia (17.8%), South Africa (34.4%), Namibia (27.3%) and Zimbabwe (26.3%).

In Zimbabwe, the Central Statistical Office in the 1992 census reported that 35% of all households were headed by women. In 1993, the Government of Zimbabwe conducted demographic socioeconomic surveys in communal areas (the reserves) and found 40% of all rural households were headed by women (Government of Zimbabwe, 1993). In 1997, a study carried out by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network reported 50% of all households in rural areas to be headed by

women (Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network, 2000). By 2002, the figure had reached 60% in rural areas and 35% in urban areas. In countries with Muslim population such as Nigeria, there are very few female-headed families because out of wedlock pregnancy is taboo and pregnant adolescents are forced into marriage by their parents (Deleire & Kalil, 2002).

Despite the prevalence of families headed by single mothers, little research has been devoted to single motherhood in Southern Africa. The main concern, generally, is that single motherhood appears to be associated with poverty impacting negatively on children (Deleire & Kalil, 2002). The rise of families headed by single mothers in Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Lesotho is occurring within a climate of increased deprivation, which supports arguments put forward by other scholars like Moyo and Kawewe (2009), who reported that female-headed families have led to the feminisation of poverty.

In 2002, the World Bank reported that 36% of Zimbabwe's 12 million people live on less than 1 US dollar per day, while 64% live on less than 2 US dollars per day. Studies have revealed that children from single-mother families are more likely to have poor health status, be malnourished, drop out of school, have poor life attainment and are more likely to be single mothers or parents in future (Deleire & Kalil, 2002). The likelihood of a woman becoming a single mother may be influenced by social, religious and cultural influences. These are likely to be through separation, divorce, teenage pregnancies and widowhood.

Wolfinger (2005) defines separation as a family event that changes the environment within which children grow up. In some cases, separation can be a positive experience as children are relieved from being continuously exposed to conflict that will be going on between the parents. In other cases, however, parental separation could be a great disadvantage for children because it could become very difficult for one parent to remain equally involved in parenting effectively. Separation often also leads to lower financial resources being available in the family leading to a negative change in lifestyle. These different outcomes have led researchers to ask under which conditions families manage to prevent parental separation from being an experience that affects their children in a negative way (Wolfinger, 2005).

According to a study completed in 2005, there are 13.6 million single parents in the USA, 84% being single mothers. This shows just how prevalent single moms are in today's society. Of this vast number of single moms, 44% are divorced, 33% were never married, 22% are married but separated, and only 1% are widows (Sweetman, 2016). The women and children are the most affected by this. Statistics from the High Court of Zimbabwe indicate an increase in the number of divorce cases in the country. In 2011, the High Court received a total of 1,551 divorce cases, a 21% increase from the 1,216 cases received in 2010 (Genderlinks, 2012).

This widespread phenomenon shows that there is a structural malfunctioning in the societies in which we are living today and calls for the corrective action if social enhancement is to be ascertained. The traditional family has been the acceptable and normal way of socialising children, whereby there was an extended family and the presence of a man has certainly changed with the ticking of the clock (Bose, 2010). Single-mother families have also emerged as a result of such evolutionary changes as more women are becoming single mothers by choice as they become more and more independent.

1.1. Objectives

- To assess the experiences of single mothers in providing childcare for their child(ren).
- To explore the psycho-social impact of single parenting on the development of children.
- To explore possible solutions to the plight of single mothers with regard to childcare.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research approach

A quantitative research approach was used in the study. It is used to answer questions on relationships within measurable variables with an intention to explain, predict and control a phenomenon (Pandey & Pandey, 2015).

2.2. Research design

For the purpose of this research, a cross-sectional survey was used. This design is most often used to document the prevalence of particular characteristics in a population (Ellison, 2010). In relation to this research, the particular characteristic of interest is that of single parenting with a particular focus on single motherhood.

2.3. Population

Polit, Beck and Hungler (2001) refer to the population as an aggregate or totality of all the objects, subjects or members that conform to a set of specifications. The population includes all elements that meet certain criteria for inclusion in a study (Burns & Grove, 2003). In this study, the population was made up of single women living in the Mucheke suburb of Masvingo.

2.4. Sample and sampling procedure

The study made use of stratified random sampling. Stratified random sampling ensures that every single mother in the population has an equal chance to be selected to take part in the research based on the strata they fall under. The sample constituted of three strata, namely unemployed single mothers, formally employed single mothers and self-employed single mothers.

2.5. Instrumentation

The researcher made use of self-administered, closed-ended questionnaires as a mode with which data were collected. The closed-ended questionnaire was adopted in this study as the standardisation of the questions ensured that the respondents were asked the exact same question in the same order (Mellenbergh, 2008).

3. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics in the form of percentages were used to analyse data. The quantitative data were then coded and analysed using Statistical Package in Social Sciences version 19. This package not only helped to analyse data but also helped the researcher to obtain frequencies and percentages which were accurate and easy.

4. Results

4.1. Challenges faced by single mothers with regard to childcare

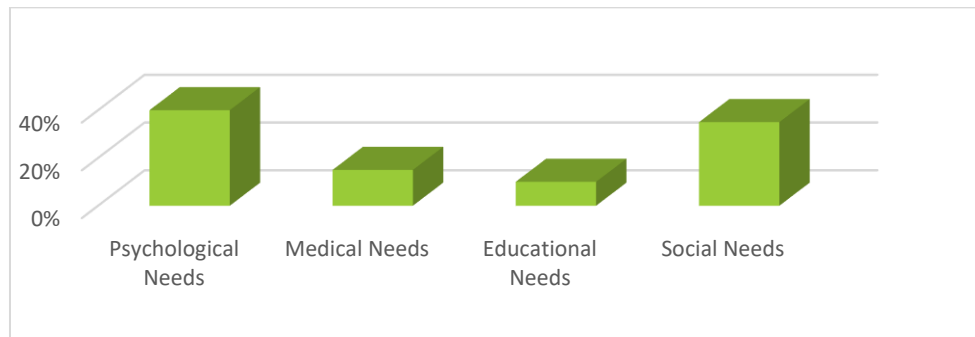


Figure 1. Childcare problems faced by single mothers

When asked to indicate the types of challenges they faced regarding childcare provision, all of the respondents indicated that they had at least two challenges and the majority (40%) of the respondents indicated that they had a lot more challenges in trying to provide for psychological needs as shown in Figure 1. The second most prevalent challenge is the provision of social needs followed by medical needs and finally educational needs. This could possibly be due to the fact that they prioritise educational and medical needs over social and psychological needs.

Table 1. Response on medical, psychological, social and educational needs

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am labelled as having lose morals because I am a single mother	10(21%)	16(34%)	2(4%)	11(23%)	8(17%)
I struggle to provide for my child(ren) learning and developmental needs	2(4%)	13(28%)	0	18(38%)	14(30%)
I have suffered from a mental disorder like depression, anxiety or panic attacks at least once before	15(32%)	19(40%)	0	7(15%)	6(13%)
I never receive financial help from the father of my child(ren) or other relatives	2(4%)	14(30%)	1(2%)	20(43%)	10(21%)
I do not spend a lot of time with my child(ren) because I have to work all the time	7(15%)	11(23%)	1(2%)	16(34%)	12(26%)
I move frequently in search of better-paying jobs and cheaper and more affordable accommodation	9(19%)	25(53%)	0	4(9%)	9(19%)
I am not able to balance my social needs and the economic needs of my child(ren)	9(19%)	25(53%)	0	4(19%)	9(19%)
I am not able to fully socialise my child(ren) without the help of the father	2(4%)	15(32%)	0	17(36%)	13(28%)
My child(ren) has behavioural problems and sometimes are physically violent and aggressive with their friends	1(2%)	3(7%)	0	25(53%)	18(38%)
My child(ren) has emotional problems	2(4%)	20(43%)	2(4%)	14(30%)	9(19%)
My child(ren) is/are often hostile to adults	0	2(4%)	0	18(38%)	27(58%)
My child(ren) are performing very well academically	(6%)	6(13%)	0	19(41%)	19(40%)

Results from Table 1 show that the respondents agreed that they were labelled as having loose morals. Results displayed in the table also show that the majority of the respondents disagreed with the fact that they struggle to provide for their child(ren's) learning and developmental needs. Seventy-two percent of the respondents agreed to have suffered from a mental disorder at least once before. Results from the study as displayed in Table 1 revealed that 64% of the respondents disagreed to have received financial help from the father of their child(ren) or other relatives. This could be a possible indicator that they actually did not get some financial help over and above what they make for themselves, which could help cushion their childcare burden. Results in Table 1 also show 60% of the respondents disagreed to not being able to spend time with their children because they needed to work all the time. When asked whether they moved frequently in search of better-paying jobs and cheaper and more affordable accommodation, results show that respondents moved frequently. Results from the study reveal that the respondents were not able to balance their social needs and the economic needs of their children.

When asked whether they are not able to fully socialise their children without the help of the child's father, results in Table 1 show that the majority of the respondents were, in fact, able to socialise their children without the help of the father. Results displayed in Table 1 revealed that 91% of the respondents felt that their children did not have behavioural problems due to the fact that they were raising them as single parents. However, the results depicted that the respondents agreed to the fact that their children had emotional problems but were not hostile to adults as reflected in Table 1.

5. Discussion

The results revealed that single mothers were labelled as having loose morals. This view is consistent with Ross (2009) in the USA, who purported that American young single mothers are labelled as being of loose moral frolics. Similar assertions were also revealed in African and Asian studies (Hambuba, 2006; Mahoney, 2010), which establish that young widows are also described as 'husband eaters', acids or witches. In a lot of these cases, the death of men in a family is strongly linked and blamed on their wives.

Findings from the study revealed that single mothers were not struggling to provide for the learning and developmental needs of their children. This finding is inconsistent with Anthony, Glanville, Naaman, Waander and Shafer (2005); Marther (2009) in the USA, Tassoni (2002) in Canada and Kail (2002) in Africa, who found that single parents had great difficulties providing for their children's learning and developmental needs. The differences in the findings could possibly be due to the fact that the families that were studied by the other scholars were from poor income families and were unemployed, whereas the current study not only focused on unemployed single mothers but also employed single mothers.

The study also revealed that single mothers had suffered from mental disorders like depression, anxiety or panic attacks at least once before, which inevitably had a negative impact on childcare. This finding is consistent with Jayakody and Stauffer (2000); White (2004) in America and Craig (2005) in Australia, who revealed that stress was a big factor in the lives of single mothers. This inevitably puts them at risk of developing mental disorders.

The current study also revealed that single mothers move frequently in search of better-paying jobs and cheaper and more affordable accommodation. This is in line with previous studies by Mclanahan (2004) and White (2004) in America, which reported that single mothers coming from low-income status tend to move frequently looking for better-paying jobs and cheaper accommodation. This mobility may have a negative impact on childcare.

The results of the study revealed that single mothers were able to spend a lot of time with their children despite having to raise them without the support of the father. This is in contrast to Walsh (2012) in the USA and Mabuza, Thwala and Okeke (2004) in Swaziland, who reported that because single mothers are forced to work all the time, they subsequently spend less time with their children.

In some situations, single parents' resort to taking their children to rural areas under the care of their grandparents, where childcare facilities are either limited or are not available at all, resulting in them not spending a lot of time with their children (Mabuza et al., 2004).

The differences in the above findings could be due to the fact that the other studies focused on single mothers in full-time employment, whereas this research not only looked at formally employed mothers but also self-employed as well as unemployed mothers. The self-employed single mothers have flexible working hours resulting in them being able to spend more time with their children. And due to the fact that they are unemployed, these single mothers are also able to spend time with their children.

It emerged from the study that single mothers were not able to balance their social needs and the economic needs of their children. This is in line with Fagan (2012) in the USA and Mbae (2005) in Kenya, who reported that in most cases, a single parent will fail to balance their social lives and economic needs of their children.

The study also revealed that single mothers were able to fully socialise their children without the help of the child's father. This is in contrast to Anderson (2010) in the USA and Azuka-Obieke (2013) in Nigeria, who reported that children from two-parent homes are better socialised and taken care of than those from single-parent homes.

The differences in the findings could possibly be attributed to the fact that, in Zimbabwe, the socialisation of children is not only the responsibility of the parents but also the extended family and community as a whole. This is, therefore, why most of the respondents felt that they were actually able to fully socialise their children even though the father of the children was not available.

The current study revealed that children raised by single mothers did not have behavioural problems. The current study contradicts Cherlin (2005); McLanahan (2004) in America and Connell and Goodman (2002) in the UK, who reported that children who have experienced a disruption in the family structure have poorer behavioural outcomes in comparison to children raised by both biological parents. The differences in findings could be because the documented findings were based on research done in the first world which has a different set of values and laws to Zimbabwe when it comes to upbringing of children.

The research revealed that children raised by single mothers have emotional problems. This correlates with findings by Davies (2013); Moime (2009) in America and Baxter, Weston and Loxia Qui (2011) in Australia, who reported that children from single-parent families have lower emotional development and have poorer emotional outcomes compared to their peers in two-parent families.

Findings from the research revealed that children raised by single mothers were not hostile to adults. This contradicted Gottman and Parkhurst (2001) in Canada and Cherlin (2005) in the USA, who reported that compared to children who came from a family with both parents, single-parent children did worse when they were rated by both teachers and parents on hostility towards adults, peer relationships, inattention, withdrawal and aggression.

The differences in findings boil down to cultural differences. Findings by Gottman and Parkhurst (2001) are based on the American culture, whereas this study was carried out in Zimbabwe where the culture is completely different. In Zimbabwe, children are raised to respect their elders. These values are instilled in the children by family members, at church, in schools and by the community as well. In Zimbabwean schools, for example, juniors are supposed to respect senior students.

It also emerged from the study that children raised by single mothers did not perform well academically. This finding is in line with Downey (2000) in America, Yongm and Yuanzhang (2008) in Asia and Maduwesi and Emenogu (2000) in Nigeria as they reported that children from single-parent homes tend to be poor performers as far as their academic work is concerned and are consistently outperformed by their peers from two-parent families.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Single mothers had a lot of bad experiences in their bid to try and provide for their children. For example, they were labelled as having loose moral because of the fact that they were single mothers. Single mothers suffered from mental disorders like depression at least once before. This is an indication that there is a noteworthy association between single parenting and mental-health problems. Single mothers moved frequently in search of better-paying jobs and cheaper and affordable accommodation. This certainly has an impact on the type of childcare provided. Single mothers are struggling to balance their social needs and the economic needs of their children, which appears to have an impact on the psycho-social development of the children. Children from single-parent families have emotional as well as academic problems. However, single mothers are able to fully socialise their children without their fathers.

The study recommended that further research be carried out in a wider geographical area and also to bring in other tribes in Zimbabwe to enable generalisation of results as the current study concentrated on the Shona people. The study also recommended that policies that support single mothers in their endeavours to support the children be enacted.

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