



Struggling through the thorns of socio-economic climate: A case of single mothers in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Single mothers experience complex life circumstances that often expose them to persistent social and psychological challenges. Although existing literature acknowledges these difficulties, limited qualitative research has explored how single mothers interpret and manage these challenges within their everyday lived experiences, revealing an important research gap. The objective of this study is to explore the psychosocial challenges encountered by single mothers and the coping strategies they employ in response to prevailing social and economic pressures. A qualitative research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of these experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 7 purposively selected participants, with additional participants identified through snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was used to examine shared experiences and adaptive strategies. The findings indicate that single mothers commonly experience social labeling, emotional isolation, psychological stress, and persistent financial strain, which collectively affect their well-being and social functioning. Participants also reported employing informal coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges, although support systems were often limited. The study underscores the need for community-based psychological interventions and social support programs aimed at addressing unrecognized mental health needs among single mothers. These findings have important implications for social policy, mental health services, and community development initiatives.

Keywords: Coping strategies; psychosocial challenges; qualitative research; single mothers; social support.

1. INTRODUCTION

A single parent is defined as a family that comprises a single father or single mother having their own dependent children (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Referring to at least 45 countries, Maldonando (2018) alluded that, on average, there is a single-parent household. Being a single parent is not a result of a single foundation; there are a myriad of factors that count from divorce, separation, death of a loved one, and others (Zamora-Martínez et al., 2025). The fraction of single mothers in Southern African countries, specifically Zimbabwe, is growing rapidly. It seems to have become a global burning issue, as supported by Kim & Kim (2020), who discovered that the number of single-parent families within Korea had increased with a significant number from 18,119,000 in 2012 to 19,524,000 in 2017. This shows a percentage increase from 9.9% in 2012 to 10.9% in 2017. Having the exact number or statistics of single mothers in a given population is a bit complex, and contemporary global research indicates an increase in the number of single parents (Jiumpanyarach, 2011).

A study carried out by Kotwa & Prabhakar (2009) discovered how single parenthood infuses emotional problems among single mothers. In their study, single mothers were observed to experience feelings of shame, guilt, anger, shame, and resentment, which then affected their personality. According to Clark et al. (2017), the challenges being faced by single mothers domiciled in urban slum regions may be somewhat daunting. A hike in levels of unemployment and extreme poverty exacerbates the precarious positions of single mothers (Ueda, 2023). Most of them end up struggling to pay for basic needs, which are critical for their health and well-being.

Child upbringing was considered one of the challenges single mothers face in the study carried out by Mupfumira (2017). From his study, one of the respondents felt it was difficult to have a mother-to-boy child conversation on development to manhood, and for the girl child, it was also difficult for the mother to present a man's perspective on marriage and dating. In studies carried out by Blank & Kovak (2009), over half of the participants in the study were poor and nearly two-thirds were high school diploma holders, with 10 percent reporting to be receiving disability income. About 17 percent of single mothers reported not working due to some health-related problems. The environment affects the proper health and upbringing of single mothers' children since the environment is fraught with some extraordinary dangers, most of them stemming from accidents, violence, and, of course, poor sanitation (Ernst & Phillips, 2013). According to a study by Mupfumira (2017) and Sharma & Prince (2025), children from single parent families often lack love, guidance, and contact with the absent parent. The custodian parent faces challenges in replacing or playing the role of the absent parent. Most of the things that boys should learn from their fathers will be a deficit. Many children who grew up in their father's absence experience a lot of challenges, for they lack a male figure who controls them and holds them accountable.

According to Stephen & Udisi (2016), the presence of a male figure from infancy constructs a secure environment for children's socialization. Related studies indicated that one of the major challenges that single mothers face is financial constraints (Azuka-Obieke, 2013; Stephen & Odisi, 2016). According to findings by Mupfumira (2017), some of the children interviewed indicated that their mothers wrestled to see them through school. Respondents from studies carried out by Mtemeri (2019) showed that most single mothers experienced challenges in the childcare provision, with 40% of the respondents testifying to having psychological and social needs as the major challenges.

As a result of several challenges single mothers experience, they developed different coping mechanisms with some of which were discovered by Kotwal & Prabhakar (2009). In their study, they discovered that 50 % of single mothers in their study coped up with strain by spending most of their time with their children, 40% used to read, listen to music and watch T.V, 44% involved themselves in household chores, 34% managed psychological problems by regular interactions with friends and 14% opted to release their pent-up emotions by crying. Financial instability was overcome by some through small-scale businesses, with others doing the unmentionables, engaging in sex work. The research is going to unpack more on the challenges faced by single mothers.

1.1. Purpose of study

The objective of this study is to explore the psychosocial challenges encountered by single mothers, including emotional stress, social stigma, and economic hardships, and to understand how these pressures impact their overall well-being. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the coping strategies and support mechanisms they adopt to navigate these challenges and maintain resilience in the face of societal and financial demands. The research questions are as follows:

- *What are the psychosocial challenges that single mothers face?*
- *What survival strategies are used by single mothers to survive in an unstable economy?*

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the challenges faced by single mothers. A purposive sampling method was used to select seven participants who could provide rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, some participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique, which allowed the researchers to identify other eligible participants through referrals, ensuring that individuals with relevant experiences were included in the study.

2.2. Data collection tool

A phenomenological research design was applied to understand the lived experiences of the participants, with a particular focus on how they perceive and make sense of their social circumstances and personal identities. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible platform for participants to describe their experiences in their own words. This method enabled the researchers to capture nuanced details of participants' daily lives, emotions, and coping mechanisms, which are central to phenomenological inquiry. According to Walton and Wilson (2018), interviews are especially effective for understanding individuals' everyday behaviors and the meanings they attach to their experiences, making them suitable for exploring the complex psychosocial challenges of single motherhood.

2.3. Data analysis technique

The collected data were analyzed thematically, allowing the identification of patterns and commonalities across participants' narratives while preserving the uniqueness of each individual's perspective.

3. RESULTS

The major thrust of the study was to understand the struggles single mothers go through in their everyday lives. With most of these single mothers suffering in silence, the study sought to examine some of the challenges they go through in their life trajectories. The findings were classified in themes using Tesch's (2013) method of analysis. Two major areas guided the study, which included: psychosocial challenges faced by single mothers and the survival strategies they employ in an unstable economy. The participants will be named using a combination of letters and numbers, for instance, p1–p7.

3.1. Psychosocial challenges faced by single mothers

Single mothers in Masvingo urban are facing a myriad of challenges, stretching from social to psychological challenges. The table below (Table 1) will show the different psychosocial challenges experienced by single mothers.

Table 1

Psychosocial challenges faced by single mothers

Themes	Participant Responses
Labelling	<p>being labeled by the community as a prostitute, a loose woman who couldn't keep her home (P3). I have been called names by society in relation to my situation (P4)</p>
Loneliness	<p>Sometimes I feel lonely, especially in the absence of my children (P2). I never felt lonely because I have a very strong support system, and I do a lot of things that keep me occupied (P4). I have never felt lonely, especially in the presence of my kids (P5). Since my separation from my husband, I experienced loneliness during the first two months before finding better management remedies (P3). Sometimes I just can't control my feeling of loneliness. I find it hard to share my feelings/emotions with my children because they will never understand my struggles (P1).</p>
Relationship wishes	<p>I wish to be in a serious relationship but not to get married, I fear my kids will be affected if I am to remarry (P1). Living in a loving and caring environment where basic resources are my least worries (P5). As much as I wish to be in a relationship, I don't date married man unless they have lied about their marital status (P4) Wish to be in a happy marriage, permanently employed, be financially stable, and take great care of my kids (P2).</p>
Reconciliation thoughts	<p>My husband was so violent, and I will never want to experience such again (P3). I don't see myself in marriage again. I have already given up, and he has also moved on with his life (P2)</p>
Financial Constraints	<p>Because I have always relied much on my husband, things are now a bit hard for me to take care of my children (P4). Before I divorced with my husband, our kids used to go to a private school, and now that he has moved and never turned his back on his family, I'm facing challenges with fees for the kids and other stuff for their upkeep (P2). I have an unstable job, and it's not always when I get money to feed these kids of mine. Sometimes I end up borrowing money from my relatives and workmates, which is a difficult thing to do and regular basis (P1).</p>
Stress and depression	<p>Work-related stress is one thing I often face regularly, and of course, with some other general and normal issues of life (P5). I'm never stressed about being single, but of course challenges that come with being single (P1).</p>

I get stressed and depressed most of the time as a result of some financial constraints. Thinking much about tomorrow (P2)

Emotional breakdown (anger, shame and doubtful, guilt feelings).	The divorce really affected me a lot to the extent that I can be easily irritated and angry for no reason (P3). Sometimes I feel guilt and regret why I divorced my all-time husband. I just feel I lacked enough help and support to manage myself and resolve all the different conflicts we had (P5). I have faced some challenges related to association and fitting back into the society. I found it difficult to associate with those who were married (P1).
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3.2. Strategies used by single mothers in alleviating problems associated with the socio-economic climate

Single mothers have always been known for their hard-working in raising their children despite separation or death of spouse. Most of the single mothers introduced themselves in the buying and selling industry so as to find enough money that suffice the needs of their families. One participant (P1) stated that, '*.... before the death of my husband, I used to hate buying and selling, having thoughts that the industry is not lucrative, rather laborious considering the time you take to have a good profit, however, after joining the industry, I blamed myself for not starting the business at an early stage. I'm taking great care of my family from this.*' One other participant stated that she was engaging in the socially unacceptable behavior, which has become a norm within her circles. She had this to say (P3), '*Things have been difficult for me, and I had no choice but engage in sex work, which is keeping me going since my husband left*'.

4. DISCUSSION

The study discovered that most single mothers face emotional problems as a result of their status. This has been a major challenge of single mothers observed by a number of researchers. The results of this study are highly supported by Kotwa & Prabhakar (2009), who stated that single parenthood comes with emotional problems ranging from feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and resentment, which affected their personality. Another challenge expressed by single mothers in the research was related to financial constraints, which also yielded some psychological ailments amongst single mothers. One participant had this to say: '*I get stressed and depressed most of the time as a result of some financial constraints. Thinking much about tomorrow*'. These results observed from the study are consistent with those of Mtemeri (2019). Loneliness has also been highlighted as one of the chiefs defies of mental well-being in single mothers. One participant stated that, '*since my separation from my husband, I experienced loneliness during the first two months before finding better management remedies*'.

Quite a number of strategies have been employed by single mothers in mitigating challenges associated with the present socio-economic climate. As evidenced by the responses from the study, most single mothers had to resort to sex work so to manage the challenges they face back home. The results are in sync with those observed in a Moroccan community by Feather (2021). In a study carried by Feather (2021), he discovered that, while single mothers are not necessarily professional sex workers (PSW), an unbalanced number of PSWs are in fact single mothers who turn to sex work to provide for themselves and their children.

5. CONCLUSION

Single mothers navigate a difficult socio-economic climate, often encountering a multitude of challenges that affect their emotional, social, and financial well-being. Common struggles include depression, stress, social isolation, stigmatization, loneliness, and persistent financial constraints, which can limit their ability to provide for themselves and their children. These challenges are compounded by societal judgments and labeling, which

further marginalize single mothers and hinder their access to social support. The cumulative impact of these pressures can have profound effects on both the psychological health of the mother and the overall development of their children, making it essential to understand the unique struggles faced by this population.

Despite these challenges, single mothers employ a variety of strategies to manage their circumstances and ensure family survival. Many do not restrict themselves to traditional employment within office settings; instead, they engage in entrepreneurial activities such as buying and selling goods or participating in the agricultural sector to generate income. These adaptive strategies highlight their resilience and resourcefulness in responding to economic pressures. Moreover, there is a need for government and social institutions to consider single mothers when allocating project funds or development initiatives, as not all can support their families through socially accepted or conventional means. Inclusion in such programs can provide much-needed financial and social support, empowering single mothers to better meet the needs of their households.

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Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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