

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY SINGLE MOTHER IN KALIMPONG DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Being a mother in general is not an easy task. It is a huge step in one's life and brings about a drastic change. Single mothers face more challenges and problems while raising their child as they have to do it all alone. The study is a qualitative study and the data was collected through primary source. Interview was conducted using unstructured open-ended questions. The sample comprised of five single mothers who were selected through convenient sampling. Findings suggest that single mothers face various issues especially emotional and financial problems. Emotional and financial support should be provided to them. They received social support from various sources and did not face issues like social stigmas.

Keywords: Single Mothers, Emotional Constraints, Financial Constraints, Social Constraints, Social Support, Physical/Health Constraints

1. Introduction: Everyone's journey through motherhood is not easy, but for single mothers it might seem more challenging. Single mothers face a variety of challenges and demands that other families may not have to deal with on a daily basis. Although single mothers are strong and resilient, it's also obvious that they frequently face significant burnout or tiredness. There are some common difficulties that single mothers experience which are as follows: maintaining work-life balance, experiencing emotional constraints, Lack of financial support, Pressure to make decisions and health issues both mental and physical. The study will be helpful in understanding the various constraints of single mothers in the of West Bengal.

Bhatt. A (2020) Many are in their peak working years, between the ages of 25 and 54,

according to Progress of the World's Women (2019–2020) and must find a way to work a full day to support their families. 3.4% of single moms are under the age of 25, which equates to 3.8 million extremely vulnerable young women, 127,000 of whom are thought to be under the age of 18 and are thought to be living alone with their young children. These adolescent mothers frequently deal with a number of injustices.

Sasha. R (2019) A report by UN Women released shows that 4.5 percent of households in India are run by single mothers. It also emphasized the issues these households face and offered solutions. Thirteen million families in India are headed by single women who live alone with their kids. The poverty rate of single-mother households in India, at 38 percent, is still significantly higher in comparison 22.6 percent for the dual-parent households in the country.

Bhatt. A (2020) Around the world, there are 101.3 million single mothers who are living alone with their children. Also, there are at least another 101.3 million women whose income and care needs are not taken into account by official statistics, making them invisible to policymakers.

In 2012, 21% of 15-year-old students lived with single-parent in the United States together with Hungary also 21%. This puts the United States at the topmost among the countries. More than 20 percent in New Zealand, 18 percent in the Czech Republic and 15-17 percent in Poland, Great Britain, Finland, Mexico, Denmark and France. At the other end, the shares of Greece, Korea, Italy and Sweden are 8.8-9.6 percent. Spain, Iceland, Norway, Ireland and the Netherlands each have shares between 10 and 11.3 percent. Most single-parent families are single-mother families. On average, 86 percent of single-parent families in various countries are single mothers. In the United States, this figure is 84 percent. **Woessmann. L (2015).**

According to Great Britain. Office for National Statistics 2016, “there were 2.9 million single parents in the United Kingdom, 18.6% represented an upsurge in single parents since 1996” **Stack & Meredith (2018).** The average age of a single parents is 38 years, with about 60% of single parents taking care for one reliant child. Single parent families represent the variety and diversity of family units in modern world (**Golombok 2000 & Golombok et al. 2016**) and can be created through situations, including divorce, separation, death of a partner, donor insemination or an accidental pregnancy.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

The review discusses the studies conducted on the various emotional, financial and social problems of Single mother:

Affandy (2023) conducted the study on the financial challenges of single mothers in Brunei, to find out how single parenting affects their lifestyle choices and the coping mechanisms these mothers employ to cope with their financial hardships. The study found out the participants were operating with a single income, covering bills alone, the high cost of living in Brunei and the absence of alimony contributed to their financial challenges. Financial stress caused them to alter their spending habits, switch to cheaper alternatives, make sacrifices and struggle to meet the needs of their children. Single mothers utilized social support, generated side income, and the unique roles of children played a significant role in reducing the impact of their financial difficulties.

Khan, Juma, Jakaria and Miah (2022) conducted qualitative research to analyse the challenges of single mothers in rural settings in Bangladesh. Thematic analysis recognized four major themes of the rural single mothers' challenges, social, economic, cultural, and psychological, leading a single mother to become dependent on other family members or relatives. The findings of the study were the deprivation of property, patriarchal social structure, and social stigma. Rural single mothers faced more multifaceted challenges than urban ones because of the lack of income opportunities, insecurity, and self-dependencies.

Ralte, Zehol (2021) Their study acknowledged and studied the issues that single mothers came across and highlighted their significance in Mizo society. The study exposed economic hardships, as the chief challenge for single mothers. It was also found that a single mother's emotional well-being had been hampered by her single status. The majority of single mothers sidestepped social activities and kept less contact with friends and neighbours following the divorce or death of their spouse.

Mishra, T. & Mishra (2021) conducted a study on the constraints of divorced single mothers relating to their social support systems and family managing approaches as they effect mental and physical health. The study found out that there are no substantial studies about the problems related to single mothers. The research found out that handling a family alone had a bad effect on single mother's physical and mental health. Absence of support from the natal family, family managing strategies, and social stigma had a noteworthy impact on a single mother's health.

Birara (2021) conducted a study to show that the challenges of single mothers like emotional, social and economic challenges. Study was conducted on 8 single mothers. The results of the study revealed that financial problem was the main problem for most of the single mothers since they are unable to sustain medical facility and educational access. Most of the participants reported that they were tested by emotional life, which caused them to be lonely, helpless, and

irritable and aggressive. Most single mothers had weak participation in social activities. Most of the participants found it hard to retain discipline among the children due to absenteeism of their husbands.

Ga Eun Kim & Eui-Jung Kim (2020) in their study found that single mothers showed lower Quality of Life than married mothers. Older age, high pay and education qualification, and job status were positively linked with the QOL of single mothers. Housing instability, advanced stress levels, depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and alcohol-related difficulties were negatively associated with the Quality of life of single mothers.

Jegan (2020) conducted the study to understand the socio-economic conditions of the widows and their livelihood in the Puducherry region in the Union Territory of Puducherry. The study focused on the widow's socio-cultural deprivation, social security, and social participation in the system. The study found out that there is no huge difference between the rural widows and urban widows are facing socio-economic problems, and widows are not much facing socio-cultural deprivation due to the progressive attitude of modern society.

Zakaria, Lazim & Hoesni (2019) their study aimed to expose mental health problems of single-mothers and discuss the adversities faced by them. Financial adversity was the most important problem among the low incomes, unemployed and poor single mothers, which displayed that poverty and mental health problems were closely related. Numerous lines of research have specified that low social support from the nearby area was the factor of the anguish of single mothers.

Rousou, Kouta, Middleton & Karanikola (2019): Their study underlined that single mothers are very probable to experience poor psychological wellbeing. Their findings put light on an important matter that would badly affect many women and their children and the community. It also underlines the requirement for involvements and policies at community level in order to support this vulnerable population.

Nora, Shafina, Hasana, Omarb, Vellymalaya & Omarc (2018) conducted a study on financial hardship of single mothers in many parts of the world. This study explores the financial wellbeing of divorced single mothers in the state of Penang and its impact on the livelihood of single mothers and their families. It was found that the single mothers met financial difficulties due to their low level of education which is the common enabler for well-paid jobs and also based on the number of dependents in their households.

Langeh & Manhas (2018) conducted the study to assess and understand the challenges and difficulties faced by single mother and also determine the level of depression and loneliness

encountered by single mothers and correlate the challenges, depression and loneliness. The results revealed that the main reason for being a single mother was due to death of the Partner. Further results revealed that the 'Financial Problems' were the main stressor for majority of the single mothers.

Ralte & Gomes (2018) conducted a phenomenological or experiential study to understand the challenges and issues faced by urban working single mothers in a multi-cultural city such as Bangalore. The findings of the study suggested common aspects of financial problems related to not having enough income and feeling inadequate in attending to their children's needs especially in supporting their child's education and saving for their child's future financial requirements. Almost all the mothers expressed psychological challenges or rather changes that they began to have after their divorce, death of spouse and general feeling of anxiety brought upon having a responsibility in single handedly bringing up a child.

Cakir (2010) conducted a study to investigate the specific stress-producing experiences encountered by single parents. The results of the study suggested that financial problems, problems related to absence of fathers in children's lives, role overload, cultural attitudes toward widowhood and concerns over effective parenting were the most frequently stated problems. The participants viewed one's own extended family members, friends, ex-spouses and relatives as the most important sources of financial, social, and emotional support.

Kotwal & Prabhakar (2009) conducted a study on the problems faced by single mothers like social, emotional and economic. The study discovered that financial problem was the main cause of stress for majority of the single mothers. The single status of single mothers affected their emotional aspect of life. Majority of the single mother reported that they felt isolated, abandoned, disheartened, lack of identity and absence of confidence. In social sphere majority of single mothers tried to sidestep attending social gatherings and had transformed their dressing style, due to depression they had developed poor food and eating habits.

Need and Significance of the Study

There are various problems faced by single parents as discussed in the above studies. The most common problems faced by single mothers are emotional, financial, social and health problems. The above studies suggest that the constraints on single mothers have not been explored in Kalimpong district of West Bengal. The study will help in finding the various problems related to single mothers in Kalimpong district. The study will be significant in finding the various constraints faced by single mothers like Emotional, Financial, Physical/health, Societal and the social support they get from various sources. The findings of

the study will help in improving the overall well-being of the single mothers and throw light upon the society as a whole to understand the problems that lie within the society. The findings will be beneficial for the people in charge or organisations who look after the welfare of single mothers. It will be beneficial for the future researchers who will conduct research on the problems related to single mothers.

2. Objectives

1. To find out their constraints related to their Emotional Well-Being of the Single Mothers.
2. To find out the Societal Difficulties they face in raising their children of the Single Mothers.
3. To find out their Financial Difficulties of the Single Mothers.
4. To find out their Health -Related Problems of the Single Mothers.
5. To find out the Social Support the Single Mothers received.

3. Methodology: The research is qualitative in nature. The data was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary source was collected using the interview method with open ended unstructured questions. Secondary sources include articles and journals. The data was analysed through content analysis and discussion method. The sample was selected through convenient sampling. The study was conducted in Kalimpong District of West Bengal.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Age	Education qualification	Widow/Separated from husband	Single Mother for	No. of Children/Dependent	Nature of work	Monthly Income
A	53	Secondary level	Widow	28 years	1	Health worker	Above 50,000
B	43	Higher Secondary level	Widow	3 years	1	Pensioner	25,000-30,000
C	52	Secondary level	Widow	6 years	2	Pensioner/ Business	20,000
D	45	Secondary level	Widow	3 years	2	Pensioner	25,000
E	64	Primary level	Separated	35 years	2	Pensioner	28,000

The study was conducted on a small group of single mothers. Permission and consent were taken from the participants for using their data. The study found that participants were of different age groups (43-64 years) and belonged to different ethnic groups. Most of the participants are less educated as they could not complete their studies due to various problems.

Participants comprised of widows and one is separated from her husband. All the participants are financially independent, some are dependent on the pension they get from their husband's job.

4. Findings:

A. Emotional Constrains:

Emotional support is an important aspect for all. If a person is emotionally disturbed, she or he may experience distress, frustrations which leads to anger and disturbed mental health. Studies have revealed that single parents experience lesser levels of mental health and low psychological wellbeing. **Ifcher and Zarghamee (2014)** All the participants interviewed were sad about the fact that they were alone and had to deal with most of their problems alone and thought it would be difficult to lead their life alone. Most of the participants at present are emotionally supported by their children and other relatives but they do feel the need for emotional support of a partner.

Participant A said 'When my husband expired, I was emotionally disturbed and thought it was impossible to lead this life. I went into depression and had cut off from the world. My family was there to emotionally support me which helped me get better with time.' She further continued 'while my child was growing up, I felt guilty for not giving her enough time and felt emotionally disturbed. Now I feel emotionally strong as I have healed through time.'

Participant B and D were still learning to cope up with the new changes and challenges.

Participant D said 'I like to stay on my own rather than stay socially active as it is difficult for me to

start and indulge in conversation with people after my husband's death'.

Most of the participants said that it was difficult for them in the beginning when they lost or separated from their husband and liked to stay on their own but slowly with time passing by and with the help of their children and relatives and friends also due to responsibilities, they learnt to overcome the grief. Most of them got emotional support from other family members, while some of their in-laws were indifferent towards them and did not support them emotionally. The study revealed that with time people get busy and divert their focus to other aspects of life.

B. Financial Constraints: The participants faced various financial problems. Financial hardships are very common in the country at present. People are facing a lot of financial crises

due to inflation in the country. For Single mothers it is all the more difficult as they have to look over the finances of the household and their children's education and also the societal duties all alone. There is no help or support of their partners. Some of the participants are able to manage their finances as they get support from other members like their son and daughter while some participants are unable to meet their expenses. "Single mothers' major problem was related to financial matters" (Richards & Schmiede, 1993)

Participant B said 'I do face financial issues though we are only a family of two but the cost of living in today's day is high. I get financial support from my sister she helps me in providing education to my son.'

Participant C said 'After my husband's death I am facing financial difficulties in meeting up with the needs of my children. I own a small business and also get some amount from my husband's pension and it is not sufficient to meet up with my family's needs. There is no one else to support me financially.'

Participant E said 'I faced financial issues when my children were younger but I learnt to cope with it by cutting down expenses on things which was not important. My husband did not support my children's financial needs. At present I am relieved as they help me with the finances.'

Participant A and D and does not have financial issues, their earning is enough as they do not have to look after anyone at present.

C. Physical/ Health Constraints

Men and women both are different physically. Women in order to do various chores require the help of others. Single mothers face issues and hardships in their daily life both health wise and in physical activities. Some of the participants faced issues as they lived alone while some have help from other family members. The study found out that Participant A and E who were working mothers faced difficulty in managing the house and job and also giving time to her child was not possible most of the times. Other participants who were at home are able to manage their household but did not pay attention to their health as they did not suffer any chronic disease and did not go for regular check-ups.

According to Participant A 'I handle my job and home my own self as I stay alone. Sometimes it is difficult to manage both the household and my job, especially the chores that require help. In, 2021 I suffered a retinal haemorrhage for which I went under treatment at present I keep a check on my food habits and also practice yoga.'

Participant E said 'While I was working, I had a difficult time in managing my home and job. I had to leave my children alone at home as there was no one to look after them. As soon as I finished my work I would rush back home.' Healthwise I am suffering from diabetes and have been taking medicines. Every month I visit the doctor for my regular check-ups and also try to control my diet.'

The study found out that single mothers staying at home were able to manage their household but did not go for regular check-ups as the working mothers. The working mothers felt bad for not being able to give time to their children.

D. Social Constraints

Human beings are a part of the society. There are various constraints that a single mother faces when she is alone. In our society women are always considered less superior than men in every field of life. But in today's world the women are no less and single mothers are the living example as they take the responsibility of both the father and mother. In a society there are constraints which each and everyone faces as individuals it maybe a social stigma related to various individuals and thought process, absence of cordial relationship with in-laws and not being able to mingle with people after the loss.

Participant A said 'My in-laws were not supportive towards me after my husband's death. It took us a long time to get back into good terms. Other than that, I have not faced any societal constraints. I did not face any social stigmas related to the norms placed by the society for a widow. I advise the single mothers to be strong and give their child the love of both their parents and help them become good human beings'

Participant E said 'It was because of the in laws that I separated from my husband and after I separated, I have no contact with them. Though it is tough, I advise the single mothers to be strong and brave in order to survive. To raise their children to become good human beings'

Participant A, B, C and D no one faced the stigma of widowhood that is prevalent in most Indian states. Participant B, C and D were in good terms with their in-laws and did not face any social constraints.

The findings suggest that the participants A and E who were with their partners for a short period were not supported by the in laws may and are not in good terms. As human we need time to create a bond with another person and due to the limited time, the bond between the participants and in laws was not so strong. Whereas, the participants B, C and D were supported by the in laws and are in good terms with them.

E. Social Supports:

Social support is an important factor for the growth of all individuals. Social support can be in the form of a person, group or institution. It helps a person grow and move on from the sorrow and grief one faces in life. The participants who were interviewed were supported mainly by their family, relatives and friends.

Participant B said ‘I was supported by my family relatives and friends to overcome the grief of my husband’s death. I am an active member in various religious and societal organisations it helps me in keeping my mind busy and also interacting with people and learning about their problems helps me in forgetting my problems.’

Participant C said ‘I was supported by my family, relatives and friends after my husband’s death. I like to keep myself busy by getting involved in various religious and societal organisations like the village community. Also, a yoga learning community which has become a part of my daily life helps me in staying socially active and forget about the grief of my loss.’

The findings suggest that all the participants were supported by their family members, relatives and friends. It was noticed that those involved in various organisations were socially active and it helped them in forgetting their grief.

5. Analysis

A. Emotional Constraints: This study shows that all the Participants have their own individual experiences after the loss or separation from their husband. Most of the participants were single mothers due to their husband’s death. Similar results were noted in another study by **Acharya et al (2011)**, ‘Death of a spouse’ was the commonest cause of single parent family. In the emotional aspect the common thing among them was how they overcame the grief of the loss. This finding associates with the theory of grief “the stage theory” of Kubler-Ross “where grief proceeded along a series of predictable stages including shock and denial, anger, resentment and guilt, depression, and finally acceptance.” Most of the people experience most of the stages or all the stages according to the theory. All the participants who lost their husband were first shocked and were in denial of the fact that they lost their husband. They were angry at the situation and felt helpless. They all have gone through depression and have overcome it for the sake of their children and accepted the truth of life.

B. Financial Constraints: In the financial aspect the Participants faced financial issues while raising their children as there was only one source of income for Participant B, C and E. These results support the statements made by **Rabindrakumar (2013) and Livingston (2018)**

that single mothers would face a higher percentage of financial constraints due to working with a single income and were regarded as the type of family that needed the most financial support. 'Financial Problems' were the main cause of stress for most of the single mothers. Similar result shows in the study by **Kotwal and Prabhakar, (2009)**.

C. Physical/Health Constraints: To handle all the physical activities of home is a tough job for a single mother. Participant A and B both working mothers faced a lot of problems while raising their children and faced problems in handling both their job and household. They felt bad for not being physically present for their children whereas the single mothers who are not working were able to manage both the household and be there for their children. It is known to all that 'health is wealth'. Health plays a very important factor in one's life. Single mothers should be more cautious about their health as they are sole care takers of their homes and also, they should focus on their overall well-being as individuals. Participants A and E who are working single mothers in health sector visit the doctors and keep a check on their health. Participant B, C and D does not go for regular check-ups and do not focus much on their health. The lack of health consciousness can be seen among the non-working single mothers. "Single mothers reported lesser life satisfaction and lower health status than married mothers according to **(Rousou, Kouta, Middleton, Karanikol)**".

D. Societal Constraints: It is a known fact "family is a basic unit of the society" In the social aspect Participant B, C and D were in a cordial relationship with their in-laws and did not face constraints from the family. Participant A and E faced issues with their in-laws and did not get support from them. The study highlighted that we as human beings need time to build relationships. Participants who were with their partners for a long time were able to bond with their in -laws even after their husband's death whereas those participants who were together only for a few years were unable to maintain a bond. Other social constrains like social stigmas especially in India related to widows of staying at home, wearing white dresses, exclusion from functions, to be less socially active and various other prejudices against them. 'In Conceptualizing Stigma (2001), sociologists Jo Phelan and Bruce Link interpret stigma as the convergence of four different factors: differentiation and labelling of various segments of society, linking the labelling of different social demographics to prejudices about these individuals; (3) the development of an us-versus-them ethic; disadvantaging the people who are labelled and placed in the "them" category.' It was found out that the Participants in the region did not face social stigmas as mentioned above. This shows that our society is progressing from the old methods and thinking and moving towards progressive thinking.

E. Social Support: Social support can be in any form. It can be a person, a group and an organisation. All the Participants in this study received support from their family, relatives and friends in the time of their grief. Formal support from welfare institutions were received by participant B and C who are active members of organisations which helps them remain active in various activities of the organisation. It has also helped them in overcoming grief as interacting with more people helped them keep their mind busy. **Endut, Azmawati and Hashim (2015)** in their study has talked about formal and informal support. Informal support system refers to community and family support in the neighbourhoods. The formal support systems comprised of government helps, welfare societies and community systems, individuals, experts, as well as online counselling facilities.” Similar support was found in the study i.e., informal social support. According to Rousou et al., (2016) “There are lower physical and mental health risks when social support is high”.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation:

Being a single mother is one of the toughest roles for a human being. A person has to look after all the aspects of life in order to give the best to their children. The study has highlighted the various constraints of single mothers. The main problems faced by them were the financial and emotional hardships. With time they have learnt to cope up with their problems and have faced difficulties in their life with strength and courage. It was found that social support from others like family, friends and active participation in societal organisations helped them in overcoming their grief. The study was based on personal experiences of the participants and it may vary from person to person. More studies should be conducted on the various problems of single mothers. Problems of working single mothers should be explored and also more works on problems of social, emotional and financial aspect should be conducted. The study should be conducted with a greater number of participants and in different parts of the world in order to know the deep-rooted problems of single mothers. The management and people in charge should help the single mothers to solve their financial problems by offering business opportunities and also focus on improving their quality of life.

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