

Single Mothers and the Journey through Socio-Economic Obligation



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Abstract

Earlier a family broke down with the death of the husband which resulted in rendering the married women a single mother. Recent times also witness the ups and down in a marital life leading to separation of husband and wife or legal termination of marriage i.e. divorce. The impact is tremendous on the upbringing of their children (if any). Responsibilities of moral support and disciplinary lessons, to children of single mothers might seem a bigger task to be carried on throughout, by the single mothers. Both husband and wife are affected by separation but the woman has to bear the greater loss and suffering. From social onlookers to the women herself designated as the single mother, she undergoes various challenges to stand by herself or her child. The social setting under which a single mother is placed is different both in the rural areas and in the urban places. Norms and values of family formation prevalent in the society go a long way in determining the position of single-mothers. The objective of this paper is to make a comparative study of the social scenario and economic stability of single mothers of rural and urban areas.

Keywords: Single Mothers, Rural Areas, Urban Places, Economic Stability

Introduction

Family as a social institution is vital for maintaining patterns of relationships among the family members and society. A joint family, a nuclear family or two-parent families may not undergo the same problems as being faced by single parent families. But when families get dissolved and marital relation ends, in most cases, it is the mother (wife) who single-handedly borne the responsibility of herself and her children. Problems faced by single mothers in India shows how hard and lonely it is for the single mothers to bear the full burden of childcare, earning a living often without the support of any other adult to share decision making and other responsibilities (as cited in A study of Single Mothers in Four Metro Cities in India, 2011). The reason for single-motherhood has changed from that of "father absence" due to death to that of "father absence" due to divorce or separation (Pravani Naidoo, 1998).

A single mother can be said to be the one who is unmarried (where a child is born out of wedlock), divorced or widowed and on whom her child or children are dependent. The status or position of women in society stands at a low level when compared with that of man due to the existence of the patriarchal structure of our society. The decision to be a single mother (in case of women residing in urban areas) voluntarily by giving up the institution of marriage rests on a women's educational strength or deterioration of family environment, made either by discord between husband and wife or by in-laws or any other issues. Many a time, voluntary decision to be a single mother in case of women belonging to rural areas may not serve the purpose due to family pressure or because she might have been economically dependent on her husband. In the case of single mothers, the social scenario is against the position of single mothers getting remarried or entering a job sector. Financial difficulties, coping with demands of children, stress management and accepting the truth of being single are some of the problems faced by single mothers. Maintaining one's self-esteem and exchanging interpersonal skills gets jeopardized, as the single-mothers fall easy victim to social pointing and shaming. The state of being a single mother may adversely affect the child or children in the formative years due to low level of attention being paid by the single mother to the children as a result of various responsibilities to be shouldered by the single mother.

Decision making process may get problematic for a single mother in a village whereas some level of independence will rest on single mothers

from the towns and cities. Literacy plays a vital role in helping single mothers to garner the opportunities they think are beneficial for them but lack of knowledge and education is a hindrance to single mothers. Getting access to occupation and jobs goes through simultaneous monitoring under the circumstances that they are single mothers. Attitude of the society towards single mothers varies deeply in different places and cultural bindings do not let new relations to grow for single mothers. Apprehensions of other people (parents) regarding a child or children of a single mother is nothing new though in many cases the later gets preferential treatment in the society

'Single mothers have been found to experience greater levels of financial hardship than other types. Low educational levels and low income have also been associated with depressive symptoms in single mothers'. (Mythily Subramaniam et al, 2014). 'Studies reveal that both mother and child suffer from the distress of major changes in life circumstances such as changes in living conditions, for instance, a family that had been living a high standard of life may end up in a low-status family life. The single mother has to make numerous adjustments in order to adapt to the changed life situations.' (As cited in Impact of Gender on Single Parenting Challenges, 2017).

Importance of the Problem

Single-mothers, irrespective of residing in rural or urban areas often confront the dilemma of juggling among various aspects of their life; from detangling conflicting relation with children, society and employment prospects to maintaining the standardized norms of society and attempting to keep the position/status of single-mothers free of stains. The sudden change experienced in the life of single-mothers with the loss of spouse or being abandoned by the husband, bear greater risk of parenting alone and facing financial constraints.

Addressing mother-child relation or familial relation outcomes, the need arises to delve for a deeper understanding of the stressful experience of single-mothers in parenting the child/children and also in challenging the circumstances put by the society.

Objective of the Study

The present study aims to understand the position of single-mothers and the level of turmoil they go through in dealing with their livelihood and social setting.

1. To study the relation of single-mother with the child.
2. To understand the impact of single-motherhood on the mother.
3. To explore the problems associated with the life of single mothers.

Review of Literature

Michael Edenborough et al (2008) in the study "Living in the red zone: the experience of child-to-mother violence" has identified that child-to-mother violence is prevalent and in many cases the mother do not get support to raise her concerns regarding the same and silently experiences the issue.

C. Anne Broussard et al (2012) in the study "Stressors and Coping Strategies Used by Single Mothers Living in Poverty" found the coping strategies

used by the single mothers in the face of extreme hardships and thereby alleviating the level of stress associated with single motherhood.

Mythili Subramaniam et al (2014) in the study "Single Mothers have a Higher Risk of Mood Disorders" opined the prevalence of mood disorders in the single and married mothers which is also associated with socioeconomic disadvantages.

Kudenga Mugove (2017) in the study "Impact of Gender on Single Parenting Challenges" identified that many challenges are to be faced by single parent on parenting their child and it affects the female single parent more when compared with the male single parent.

Shalini Bharat in her study "Single Parent Family in India: Issues and Implication" is of the opinion that the issue of one-parent family is to be understood in the light of Indian context and it is also changing from the traditional two-parent family system.

Research Design

The research has been carried on with the help of secondary data, i.e. review of literatures to get an insight on the living condition of single mothers.

Analysis and Discussion

Parenting a child single-handedly pose many challenging situations for the mother. Aspects like developing positive emotional bonding between mother and child, making the child understand marital disputes and subsequent consequences like divorce, upbringing the child and trying to give him/her disciplinary attitudes, making the children prosper towards growth and development et al are to be kept in mind of the mother. Life of a single mother in rural areas and urban areas will have differences except with few similarities of being suffered or facing the social duties. Adjusting to changes in the society, facing never-ending questions on the child's upbringing and developing healthy family relationships rests on the mother. Quality of parenting becomes vital in determining a child's academic achievement and learning proper social norms. A home with a single mother have to learn the importance of prioritizing work, as the role of a single mother gets doubled in the absence of her spouse.

Single mothers are more likely to feel unhappy and thus experience the state of isolation more. The loss of self-esteem to loss of self-confidence again augments with the prospects of income getting limited. In addition there are the personal problems such as guilt, fear, frustration and loneliness ever present and always threatening' (Jane 1970; Ilgenfritz 1961). 'It is not surprising that life as a single mother might sometimes feel tough. Single parent families have about 47% less disposable income than coupled families; moving house and finding new neighborhood supports is rated as one of the most stressful life events. It is estimated that from 25 to 40% of all single mothers have experienced family violence' (Single Mothers, a source for parenting also, 2009). Prevalence of conservative notions of the society about women's rights do not help in entitling rights to single mothers and in the absence of the husband in rural areas, the single

mother may be more prone and subjected to sexual violence or subjugation. Even in the urban areas, sexual advances and atrocities may be perpetrated against the single mother. In most times, single mothers are unable to protest their unwillingness and become a victim of psychological and sexual violence.

'Understanding of family violence have broadened over the past 30 years and include violence directed towards mothers from their child or children' (Jackson 2003; Stewart et al. 2004, 2006; Michel et al. 2008). Abusive behavior from child or children hampers a mother's well-being and many a times, the mother is a silent recipient of the offensive relationship between mother and child. 'Cottrell & Finlayson (1996) make clear that child-to-mother violence is not part of normal adolescent behavior, describing it as any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over a parent' (Michel et al. 2008). According to the Functionalists in sociological theory, the parts of any system, working together, completes the whole. Thereby, when a family, seen as a social system, breaks down, the family members witnesses the hurdles and the inter-relation among the members seem irreparable.

Active participation of single mothers in decision making is not a welcome move due to cultural constraints or family heritage of male decision makers. In rural areas, the decision of a single mother to move out in search of income earning opportunities in most cases gets neglected. Pertaining to family values and age-old customs, the single mother becomes a mere witness of the responsibilities and duties entrusted to her and children. Voicing opinion against decisions of the other members of the family is a far cry for the single mothers. A single mother in a rural area may not be allowed to step in productive labor and earn an income. Comparatively, single mothers in urban areas can arrive at decisions to move to new homes either with self-financial support or from the maternal side.

Mental health of the single mother and children are important to be taken care of in order to establish a positive family environment. 'Family structure has also been identified as an important factor related to mental health outcomes, with single motherhood emerging as a powerful predictor of poor mental health' (Jayakody & Stauffer; Burgos et al, 1995, McLanahan, 1985). Positive mental health and physical health are important parameters to measure the psychological well-being at home and workplace for people. This is true for single mothers too. If they experience depression, frustration, emotional fatigue or physical weakness, embracing a cordial environment would not be possible. 'Health and wellness play a vital role in encouraging individuals to engage with a wide range of activities that could contribute to the growth and development of individuals at every stage of life' (Nurliza et al, 2015).

Single mothers go through social stigma and discrimination and coping with them is also an added burden. Single mothers even migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of better livelihood opportunities and in order to escape the brutal

treatment of in-laws (if the husband expires or even if he survives by his family), social ostracization, etc. Discrimination starts at home itself inflicted by other members of the family on the single mother and her children, making the single mothers lonely and obliged to perform duties as said. This discrimination reaches the next level at educational institutes for children where they are bullied leading to low self-esteem in the particular child which hampers the socialization process of the child.

'Women who lack previous work experience, who do not have a high school degree, and who have more than two children are at increased risk of employment instability and lower incomes' (Teresa Ciabattari, 2005; Corcoran et al, 2000). Lack of education and prior work culture make it challenging for single mothers to enter the job market. Apprehensions of recruiters towards single mothers as freshers in a work ambiance leading to poor outcomes in a job are a common sight. This leads to a struggle between earning and maintaining the daily requirements of the child or children. Fighting traditional gender roles is a herculean task where women are confined with child rearing and household chores and men are known to bring financial stability to the home. It is to be noted that traditional gender norms restrict single mothers or women to work outside the domestic sphere to maintain their 'purity'. Single mothers in rural areas are not encouraged to join the workforce; hence boredom increases as they get no space to channelize their potentialities. Educational attainment of women in the urban areas inspires them to explore the public sphere and join the labor force. To strengthen women participation on workplace and bring changes in the private or domestic sphere, single mothers too need the encouragement to step out and enhance women labor force.

Single mothers in the urban areas or rural areas, who are already earning, do face work-family conflict and financial stresses. Unable to balance between family expectations and life satisfaction; a bitter relationship grows with other family members or their children. Problems, like maintaining self-confidence, low self-esteem and dealing with emotional shifts, are to be dealt with. The struggle to deal with constant social prejudices of a single-mother is a never-ending issue. Working single-mothers face with the dilemma to handle work pressure, career advancement, and family. The well-being of children through single motherhood is looked on by various factors. First, studies indicate that single mothers experience usually high level of psychological distress because they are exposed to more stressful events and more ongoing strain in the form of low income than households headed by married couples (McLanahan, 1984). Second, many of single-parent households earn low income and are disproportionately living in poverty. Single parents, usually mothers, are in a lack of financial support from a father often and are often required to work long hours thereby making children receive less attention and guidance which impede their social development as well as education performance (Kunz, 2014).

Suggestions and Conclusion

Women are to be respected and valued for the innumerable contribution they make towards the society. The multiple roles played by single mothers require admiration for the courage displayed by them. Empowerment of single mothers is the clarion calls of the day, as it will enhance women participation in the fields they are expected to be expert or least keep them busy. Stereotypical gender norms need to be obliterated in order to give the required space to single mothers. Motivation, emotional strength and support should be extended to single mothers to help themselves come out of emotional conflicts. Both rural and urban households should encourage single mothers to leave the house and enroll themselves in training of their skills to get placed in a job or start innovative prospects of earning. With access to adequate opportunities, single mothers should be encouraged in entrepreneurship through a start-up. Remarriages are to be encouraged among the widowed single mothers if they are willing to enter the institution of marriage again. This shall give a new meaning and to start anew their life. The role of single-mothers is to be highlighted for they garner the strength to cope with situations concerning themselves, their child or children and the society at large.

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