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The psychosocial impact on single mothers' well-being - A literature review

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Abstract:

In India, single-parent families are proliferating. In particular, women are taking the lead in assuming the role. They are the most vulnerable of all the disadvantaged groups. Due to an absence of financial and social support, single mothers endure a great deal of emotional strain. So, the aim of the study is to investigate the various psychosocial factors that influence the well-being of single mothers. Additionally, this research seeks to assess the coping strategies employed by single mothers. This article reviews 80 studies on psychosocial concerns faced by single mothers, focusing on mental health, challenges, and social support. It cites 71 publications from 80 sources from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, between 1980 and 2023. The study used keywords as a search strategy such as "single mother," "mental health," "challenges," and "social support." The results showed that the absence of financial resources, education, and social support had a negative impact on the emotional and social well-being of single mothers. Children of single mothers are more likely to struggle with addictions like alcoholism, tobacco use, delinquency, hazardous sexual behavior, and even suicidal thoughts due to dysfunctional parenting. As a result, single mothers use their religious convictions, support networks, and social networks as coping mechanisms. The study implies that premarital counseling and health education are essential for young couples to prevent family disintegration in the event of divorce and separation. To provide assistance and improve the overall quality of life for this vulnerable population, collaboration between government and nongovernment organizations is necessary.

Keywords:

Mental health, single mothers, social support, well-being

Introduction

In the 21st century, single parenting is a worldwide phenomenon. It is argued that in rapidly changing societies around the globe, the prevalence of single-mother families is steadily increasing.^[1] Single parents are a denigrated group because they have certain traits that give them a social identity that is often looked down upon by society. Although the idea of single fatherhood is part of society, the vast majority of single parents are women. Globally, single-parent families have skyrocketed, with single mothers outnumbering

three-quarters of single-father families.^[2-5] Whereas women are predominantly leading single-parent families.

In India, there are enormous social stereotypes about single mothers. They may be branded as "social losers" who become single mothers as a manifestation of their sin and curse. "Single mothers" are mothers who are single, widowed, separated, deserted, or divorced.^[6,7] Single mothers were regarded as breadwinners and major carers in single-headed families.^[8-13] One family in every four is at risk, and the most usual situation is when the mother has custody of the child. However, the majority of female

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household heads are widows, followed by divorced or separated women.^[14]

Single mothers with dependent children are the most marginalized and underprivileged group in society.^[15] Therefore, they have faced discrimination, task overload, exclusion, insecurity, and misconceptions as social obstacles.^[5] Due to cultural norms, demands from families, and bias against women, single mothers who wish to get involved in the labor force are subjected to immense pressure.^[15] Single mothers are viewed as insufficient; consequently, they become socially excluded and are subjected to extreme prejudice and condemnation.^[16,17] In general, they have a lower level of education, a poorer household income, and are more likely to reside in extreme poverty, experience unemployment, and cultivate depression than married working mothers.^[18] Whereas rural single parents perceived themselves to be deprived in relational, socioemotional, material, and other dimensions.^[19] In India, single mothers face baffling challenges due to cultural and religious stereotypes. Single mothers frequently face false accusations, which tend to make them feel unworthy.^[20] Therefore, due to vulnerability, single mothers are still prevented from attending social gatherings.^[21]

The primary source of mental strain for a single mother is not being a mother but handling the headship in the absence of a partner.^[22] Single mothers endure psychological pressure that results in emotional tension, feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and aggression.^[5] Single mothers face social, financial, and mental health problems, which remain barriers to having a successful child.^[21] Also, they face obstacles to receiving quality mental healthcare, such as a shortage of child care, the stigma associated with asking for help, a lack of access to welfare programs and training, and family obligations.^[23] Moreover, they undergo high emotional distress.^[24] Therefore, single mothers were significantly more likely to be in a crisis situation than single fathers. In the context of India, there has not been much research conducted on single mothers. So, the study casts light on and highlights the impact of psychosocial factors on the well-being of single mothers.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

This article undertakes a literature review to investigate the preceding studies on psychosocial concerns experienced by single mothers. An extensive search has been conducted to discover relevant papers. The papers are based on both qualitative and quantitative research in the fields of psychology and sociology.

Data collection tool and technique

The research successfully referenced works that are indexed on Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and other sites and was used to make 80 papers. In the end, this study was able to cite 71 of 80 publications that were referenced. As keywords, the words “single mother,” “mental health,” “challenges,” and “social support” are used.

Eligibility criteria

The inclusion criteria for the selection of articles are as follows: the articles must have been published between 1980 and 2023; they must have been subjected to a rigorous peer-review process; and they must be indexed in reputable databases. Single mothers with dependent children have been included in the inclusion criteria.

Objectives

The aim of the study is to investigate the various psychosocial factors that influence the well-being of single mothers. Additionally, this research seeks to assess the coping strategies employed by single mothers.

Research question

What are the major factors affecting the psychosocial well-being of single mothers?

The factors influencing psychosocial well-being *Financial inadequacy*

Families headed by single mothers are substantially at risk for extreme economic hardships.^[21,25-28] Also, single mothers are more economically excluded than single fathers or married couples.^[29-31] Moreover, single mothers' livelihoods are affected due to economic insecurity.^[32] Besides, many single mothers share housing with families or other adults, but individuals who must rely only on their own income to finance a household may find themselves in a more precarious financial position than those who share housing.^[33]

Single mothers have a lower average income than married mothers, have a substantially higher risk of being poor, and are significantly more likely to be hungry.

They frequently do not have access to health insurance and have insufficient funds for education, either for themselves or for their children.^[8] A rise in the overall number of single mothers has indirectly contributed to a spike in the number of impoverished households.^[34] Despite the fact that economic issues are prioritized, the social well-being of single parents is a societally prevalent feature. Finally, a financial crisis is the most prominent cause of single mothers' psychological issues, which they are unable to resolve on their own, causing severe misery.^[5]

Low wages and unemployment

Single mothers who are the primary breadwinner typically have jobs with low pay, but they are responsible for supporting dependents, who are often young children.^[35,36] It has been found that single mothers earn substantially less than single fathers.^[37] Therefore, these families confront additional obstacles when these single mothers work low-wage occupations to support their families. Working single mothers may face more struggles than married women in balancing family commitments and job expectations.^[38]

The emotional health of rural and urban single mothers and children is hampered by their low monthly incomes.^[39] In general, employed single mothers are much more likely to hold low-paying, unskilled jobs than married mothers.^[38] Hence, low-status employment, long work hours, and a hectic work schedule have all been linked to an increased risk of being unable to meet family obligations. Therefore, they must deal with a variety of stressors, such as discrimination, unemployment, and extreme destitution. Thus, single parents had poorer mental well-being than married mothers.^[40]

Psychological imbalance

Single mothers encountered higher psychological distress.^[38,41] Emotional stress is more prevalent in single mothers than in married mothers. Therefore, they confront detrimental effects on their mental and physical health.^[42] Some mothers who raise their children alone can suffer from serious mental health issues, including sleeplessness, restlessness, anxiety, sadness, feelings of unworthiness, aggressiveness, and even attempts at taking their own lives.^[43] Existing research makes it clear that despite their best attempts to satisfy their financial obligations, single parents are likely encountering higher levels of anxiety, depression, and strain.

Due to their additional responsibilities and negative social relationships, head-of-household mothers experience greater social isolation and frustration, which leads to the release of negative feelings and emotions.^[44] Additionally, single mothers have poor mental health and a low quality of life, as well as depressive symptoms, high levels of stress, and alcohol-related issues compared with married mothers.^[45,46] In contrast, partnered mothers reported greater mental health and less financial stress than single mothers.^[47]

Lack of social support

Society, family, friends, and institutions may assist and provide social support to women with problems. These social supports facilitate the health and well-being of women. Whenever social support is high, both emotional and physical hazards are diminished.^[48] However, a lack of familial and material support, equipment, and

social networks all contribute to single mothers having inadequate resources. Therefore, single mothers become depressed without social support.^[48-50] They suffer higher levels of poor health when they lack support from society.^[51] The ability to adapt survival strategies requires both internal and external support networks: Family and friends provide internal support, while welfare institutions, government organizations, and the community provide external support.^[52] Female-headed households are likely to have poor mental health due to financial instability and a lack of social support.^[53] Therefore, social support is a significant predictor of health outcomes for single mothers.

Results

From the viewpoint of society, being a woman without a partner is terrible, a curse, and full of discrimination. Financial instability, a lack of social support, and additional responsibilities are the peculiar burdens that single parents encounter when it comes to childrearing.^[54] The primary sources of support for a single mother are family and friends, who play an indispensable role in single mothers' survival strategies.^[55,56] When social support is high, psychological and physical hazards for single mothers decrease.^[48] There are many different kinds of support networks available to single mothers. Single mothers had outstanding support from everyone, including family, peers, and significant others.^[57] Otherwise, support can come from multiple sources, including society at large, family members, peer groups, and organizations specifically geared toward assisting women who are struggling.^[43] Single mothers desired to receive substantial assistance from society as a whole, but unfortunately, in real life, they received assistance primarily from their family and parents.^[58]

Nevertheless, working single mothers had greater obligations in caregiving, homeschooling, housework, and paid work than mothers in two-parent households.^[59] Thus, married mothers have higher social support than single mothers.^[60] Previous studies demonstrate conclusively that they receive support only from friends and family and not from the government. Single parents, particularly single mothers, exhibit greater levels of anxiety, depression, and stressful situations than married mothers, and they endure economic barriers and a lack of social support.^[61,62] The relationship between mental health and poverty elucidates a noteworthy connection between individuals who are part of lower socioeconomic strata and the heightened prevalence of psychiatric disorders compared to their counterparts in higher socioeconomic strata.^[63] Obviously, a lack of income significantly impacted the mental health of both the single mother and the children.^[39] Also, low levels

of education and income have been proven to cause depression symptoms among single mothers.^[23] So, the findings of the study demonstrate the significance of formal and informal social support as essential for the growth and well-being of single mothers.

Discussion

The depressive symptoms were more prevalent in homes headed by single mothers between the ages of 25 and 50 years, and economic challenges and limited social support were not connected to depressive symptoms in the family.^[64] By the way, single mothers may encounter higher levels of psychological distress compared to mothers in two-parent families, but there is no substantial evidence to suggest that they are more prone to experiencing severe mental health issues.^[65] Additionally, to prove that, single mothers indicated worse mental health and greater financial strain than married mothers.^[47] Most single mothers have a profound belief in religious activities, which also serve as coping mechanisms in their daily lives. Additionally, single mothers may embrace their belief systems, support systems, and social networks to overcome emerging obstacles.^[66] Thus, the study revealed a positive relationship between religious belief and emotional health among single mothers.^[67]

The challenges of being a single parent are plentiful and tremendous. Raising children becomes more challenging for single parents due to responsibility overload, workload, and psychological excess. Due to the lack of maturity and experience that comes with age, single motherhood can pose greater challenges for younger mothers.^[62] Meanwhile, the additional responsibilities and negative social relationships impact the head-of-household mothers to experience greater social isolation and frustration, which leads to the release of negative feelings and emotions, which in turn results in children's risky behavior.^[44,68] Consequently, children who grow up in poverty are not only burdened by worse health and a lack of education but these issues can also be fostered by poor parental styles and behaviors.^[69] Due to dysfunctional parenting, single-parent families may not achieve the desired outcomes for their children, and they may adopt maladaptive coping mechanisms such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption, delinquent behavior, engaging in hazardous sexual activity, and even attempting suicide.^[68,70] The use of alcohol and antidepressants are used by single mothers to evade their problems and alleviate their stressful situations.^[9] Also, a majority of single mothers abstained from remarriage due to concerns about the well-being of their children.^[71] As a result, women are better able to look out for their mental health and overall well-being when they have access to social support. Therefore, emotional well-being

is indispensable for single mothers to face societal challenges.

Future implications

According to the preceding studies, the living conditions of single mothers have deteriorated in terms of economic, social, psychological, and cultural pursuits. There is a critical need for research on single mothers in the contemporary era. The Ministry of Women and Child Development holds responsibility for assessing the current situation of single mothers in India. Therefore, the Indian government should compile and publish data pertaining to the entire population of single mothers in the country. Education and training for employment, as well as guidance in parenting skills, are all extremely important for single mothers. The acquisition of new skills can be of assistance to single mothers in their pursuit of financial independence. To improve the economic prospects of single mothers, these women should be given the opportunity to participate in vocational training courses for women that are run by the government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector.

Conclusion

In terms of conclusion, measuring hardships and assessing the mental health problems of single mothers might help in the development of long-term family policies and support. Access to social support, community resources, and mental health services can help single mothers mitigate potential negative consequences and promote positive mental health outcomes. In addition, the study suggests that premarital counseling and health education are essential for young couples to prevent family disintegration in the event of divorce and separation. Governmental and nongovernment organizations must work together to aid and improve the quality of life for this vulnerable population. For the social well-being of single mothers and their children, policies focusing on early identification of alcohol-related problems as well as interventions are necessary. The acquisition of new skills can be of assistance to single mothers in their pursuit of financial independence. To improve the economic prospects of single mothers, these women should be given the opportunity to participate in vocational training courses for women that are run by the government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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