



Societal Effects of the Absence of the Father in the Home: A Christian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The single parents' household is one of the fastest growing phenomena in the world only second to families living with a father and mother and their children together. While it is true that all single parents struggle in many ways to cope with responsibilities and survival, it is the children, that suffer the most. Of all one-parent households, the mothers are more in number, therefore by implication single motherhood has become the mainstay of single parenting at 84.5%. The ramifications of this are that children in many of these homes are raised without a father and are adversely affected. It can be argued that such living conditions cannot be generalized as risky. Though some arise from broken families, the children are not to be conclusively classified as broken. Yet, it is noticeable that the children who are bereft of a father and only raised by a mother have a greater risk in their future lives. From research, it is clear that some children raised without a father during therefore formative years often wind up with psychological and sociological challenges including early pregnancies, gangs, drugs, school dropouts, and prison. The article seeks to establish the effects of the father gap on children and society.

Key Words: *Single Parents, Fatherless Children, Societal, Divorce, family, poverty*

INTRODUCTION

It is a societal expectation, that if there is a mother then a father must live with her. The mother is simply the female parent of a child or children who is the direct opposite or counterpart of the father (Fagerstrom, 1993: 61). Unfortunately, facts are not always in line with this ideal because so many mothers live alone with their children. In other words, the mere fact that the family is found in this disposition does not speak to the fact that this family is broken. Societal expectations may have the stereotypical view of absent fathers' families but they survive and some are truly successful in having a well-rounded family that can be evaluated as healthy. It is for this reason that single mothers have been designated as an authentic alternative family and can only be compared to the traditional family style of the father, mother, and children. It is, therefore, not easy to describe a typical family today because the traditional family including a wage-earning man, a housekeeping and child-rearing woman, and their offspring persists only as an ideal for some and inspires criticism for others. Others have concluded that this ideal is an institution of the past (Mores and Atherton. 1971 96)

Problem-oriented research focuses mainly on the father's absence and not the mother's presence. (Peterson, 2001: 36). The author points out this as one of the biggest challenges of the research because it usually focuses on the negativity that husbands are not there or they are simply absent for whatever reason. The focus of the subject is to clarify, that the father's absence cannot be ignored. In as much as the trajectory of single motherhood is at an all-time high, the absence of the father continues to be felt in society.

In One Parent Family, the authors indicate that "the normal family is considered to be the immediate group of father mother, and children living together" This may be more specifically defined as a nuclear family (Berlson and Steiner, 1964) quoted in Schlesinger. Since 1970 parent families have acquired an importance not adequately reflected in the traditional law. The problem of single parents is related to the fact that today's society is dominated by the idea of the nuclear family. Therefore, the emphasis of family in this light affects the children who are raised in the single-mother's home. These children begin to feel and think that there is something wrong with their existence, which is why perhaps circumstances are not well for them.

The single mother's household is one of the fastest growing phenomena in the world only second to families living with father and mother and their children (Green, 1981:2-3). Of all single parents worldwide, the mothers account up to more than 80.4% of all households (Gitnux Market Data: 2024). The implication is that when you refer to single motherhood, it is the mainstay of single parenting in the world. The implication of this is that children in many of these homes are raised without a father and are adversely affected by the father absence syndrome which is complex and manifests sooner or later.

This means that the traditional family would not be the only side of family influence and to a great extent, the family is tilting towards single parents and mothers to be precise. In the year 1982 census there were about 6,839,000 single parents' households in the United States of America. Mothers were the heads of 6,147,000 of these homes, divorced mothers were 2,841,000, 1,548,000 were separated, and 1,168,000 were never married. On the contrary, the fathers head 962,000 single parents' homes 386,000 fathers divorced 88,000 were widowed, 68,000 never married, and 150,000 were separated (American

Census, 1985). This creates a backdrop to the specific needs that single mothers might have in raising their children in the absence of the father. It also demonstrates that, so many children in society are living without a father.

As early as the year 1986, in the United States, further demographics from (Norton and Glick) indicated that forty percent of all children under eighteen were expected to spend part of their lives in a single-parent home and usually a mother (Peterson Wendy 2001, 25). Further statistics indicate that 27.3 percent of all homes were headed by single parents and mostly mothers (US Census, 1998). The magnitude to which these statistics present themselves in defining the reality of the problem is quite alarming, yet this information is very useful in preparing society for the future. The challenge is by no means reducing despite the negativity that generally surrounds it. As the trend keeps growing the problems are becoming more pronounced in various communities of the world especially affecting children sooner or later.

In the year 2002 scholars documented a worrying report on the escalating figures at the turn of the 21st century in that, “never in history has there been such several single mothers raising children alone (Armstrong 2002:9). Of over twelve million single parents households, single mothers accounted for over ten million. Twenty million of all children in the United States under the age of 18 live with only one parent and 84 percent of all the children who live in one-parent households live with their mother. Amazingly, in the same vein, 32 percent of all births are to unmarried women (Leman, 2012: x). The absence of the father cannot be considered homogenous, it results in death, divorce, separation, and unwed parenthood.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The absence of the father in the home leaves the single mother to struggle with many challenges that affect the bereft mother, her children, and ultimately, society as a whole. These challenges include the economic gap, parental psychological health in the children, delinquency, substance abuse, school dropout, divorce, poor relationships, and the overall societal crime rate. Literature and observation confirm the reality statistically and provide the level of effect that this absence exerts on the family and society. This article seeks to bring awareness on the subject and for preparation of the family and society to meet the growing social reality.

CAUSES OF FATHER ABSENCE FROM THE FAMILY

It has often been assumed that divorce and single parenthood is a societal issue.

What this meant is that divorce contributes to the realities of poverty, delinquency, and poor educational performance for children (Glenn and Kramer, 2010). The challenges that the issue of divorce brings to society are complex. The women who are divorced end up in multiple challenges and the children that they have custody over, either may drop out of school or become delinquent. At the rate of these statistics highlighted, society as a whole is directly and indirectly affected. The levels of poverty rise, the increases in crime, and other social ills like mental disorders and depression set in. In many cases, single mothers are more likely to have lower education levels and more likely to be unemployed or doing low-paying jobs that are usually part-time. They are highly likely to have challenges in finding support from the fathers of their children (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008) These and other documents on the subject prove that single-mother parenting is a growing concern globally. In Africa, compared to married mothers’ single mothers are highly the poorest and live below the poverty datum line (Clark and Hamplova, 2013:13)

Many families try to stay together but sometimes this isn’t possible. Husbands and wives separate and family relationships break down. For most children, this is a traumatic experience and most parents want to find ways to help their children through their difficult times. Here are some ideas that others have found helpful (Holford, 2006:116-119) The thoughts that children will have about the reasons why their parents divorced are often quite difficult to bear. Melgosa suggests that the easiest way for the children left in the family to hate the father usually comes for the sentiments that the mother makes (Melgosa and Melgosa 2004: 32)

It is against this background that divorce should not be understood as an outside option and that those who have been victims of divorce owe the world no apology. While it is true that families strive to stay together, we still find such disagreements between the husband and wife that are irreconcilable. These may be resolved but may also end in the dreaded unfortunate situation of separation.

Divorce reveals that there is absolutely no guarantee that a child’s parents’ marriage will continue and that the family will not be radically changed (Root, 2010. 32) At the current moment we have no guarantee that a child will grow in a family with both parents present that is the father and the mother. It is a model that is unpleasant but is duly recognized in society, that the children will at a certain time be presented with such a situation in life as to leave without father.

While divorce can liberate parents to seek a new meaningful future for the child divorce will likely hinder self-development. Divorce can at times provide relief from an abusive marriage relationship to the husband and wife and though they may enjoy the freedom it may not always be the case for the children of divorce. It is always a challenge for the children, especially in the times when they are still young. The balance between the love of the father and the mother who are split will often pose a stoppage in a certain flow of life and therefore the need for the church to mitigate that pressure.

Some women choose single parenting to save their children from certain challenges that they may face, had they continued with both parents. Those who choose to separate, often do so because they have had no option for a better life than to go it alone. Wives and not husbands usually initiate most of the divorces. “Many of these women may have a good cause to separate, they or their children may have suffered unbearable circumstances of verbal physical,

or emotional abuse (Armstrong, 2002:23). Though the mothers may indicate justifiable reasons for leaving the toxic marriage it is the children that get affected the most.

The other reason why some women choose to divorce is because their children have a better chance of improving their lives than in a toxic environment. One of the arguments advanced is that, by gaining greater economic security for themselves women are in a position to make rational decisions about whether or not to enter marriage (Ziehl, 1994: 42). In short, they may endure longer in the hardships of marriage if their economic base is not strong enough. It is also said because of the expanded roles of women in society they are now able to support themselves well outside marriage (McLanahan and Booth, 1990:417). According to the modernization theory out of wedlock motherhood is a result of modernization (Dlamini, 2006: 3). It could also be argued that the economic challenges of a society would precipitate the fathers leaving because it is tied to male joblessness.

Much teenage sexual activity results in early pregnancies and poorer countries this has always been the situation. Little notice was paid to this trend until large populations moved off the land into the cities and the traditional tribal structures started to break down. "The problem this has created in terms of unsupported young mothers and fatherless infants has scarcely implicated itself in world consciousness and crime, especially in developing countries. In Britain 100,000 teenagers fall pregnant annually, one-tenth of the population" (Hudson and Ineichen, 1999:14). One out of every 10 girls in Britain alone will have the possibility of getting pregnant and then stagger into the mother bracket that they cannot easily be redeemed (Ibid). If indeed it is true that in the first world and developing countries such is the status of things what must it be for the poorer countries?

Teenagers who are mothers are on the whole unprepared for what lies ahead. The support suggested by Kellman seldom is available. He asserts that "parents cannot offer their daughter reliable or consistent support." (Kellman Prince). The problem of teenage motherhood seems in this context twofold, firstly because the teenager's parents are rarely available to assist their child, and except to cope with her situation where she still needs the mother's and father's care she lands in a parental bracket. More than that, the second problem is that the teenage mother is not psychologically prepared for what lies ahead. To this end, the challenge of the young mother is simply compounded and might even last her a lifetime if she does not find someone to accept that position and move in with her as a matrimonial partner.

EFFECTS OF CHILDREN WHO GROW WITHOUT A FATHER

The first major concern is the observation of the level of delinquency of the children who are raised in single mothers' homes. One such record is that single mothers have raised 78 percent of the current prison population in the United States of America. (United States Census,). These figures may be more or less the same in Africa owing to the global dynamics and the similarity of life trends across the world. It is no wonder that it is recorded that at least 77 percent of children in parents' homes have endured and even witnessed physical abuse, therefore can be attributed to their current behavior.

America First Policy Institute posits that 90% of the children who are either runaway or homeless are from fatherless homes. (America First Policy) This gloomy yet realistic picture provides the backdrop of the necessity not only for further study of the subject but also the need for properly and carefully planned responses. These incredible challenges include some data showing that children born in a single mother's home are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school (Guest, Duncan, Khalil 2015:36-41). These challenges not only affect secular society but Christians too, who are part of the greater society. Therefore, it is a cross-cutting reality.

Children in the single mother's home are the most affected victims of this kind of family arrangement. In considering the subject of children who find themselves in the crossfire, data reveals while divorce may liberate parents to seek a new meaning for the future, for a child divorce is likely to hinder their personal development (Andrew Root, 2023:14). The extent to which the damage can be done will last in a child for a lifetime. "The father keeps busy out in the world; the mother manages the household and because of this division of labor infants, even those with fathers often are fatherless during most of their working hours. (Paul L. Adams, Judith R. Milner, and Nancy. 1984)

Children who grow up without the father lose time with both the father and the mother in that the former is completely out of the picture and the mother is out by circumstances. She is out trying to fend for the family in her absence. This may also happen because the mother and the father still need time to dust themselves off the dirt of the former relationship that they abandon the child. This gap may cause the child to have a weakened relationship in the future because of the neglect. The child may find it difficult to trust his father and other people too.

The Loss of economic viability and security is another key component that affects children. Because custodial mothers lose at least 25-50% of their pre-divorce income they quickly slide into poverty. The loss of the father to children often leads their mothers to destitution and dependent on public assistance more than their male counterparts (Edwards, 2014). This makes them vulnerable to many non-legal practices' prostitution, early sex, drugs, and theft. Most of the children who live with their single-mother families live in poverty. This affects the children's ability to complete their education and have a decent income even in the future. Children with married parents attained higher income levels as adults.

As a rider to the lack of economic strength the children of fatherless homes struggle to cope with school demands. These children present higher chances of being absent from school than those with both father and mother. (Pong, Donkor, and Thompson). In industrialized countries, statistical indicators show that married parents' children scored better in Math and science. It is here established that the mental distress caused by the father's absence to the child causes cognitive problems in the child's academic pursuit. They continue to score very low on academic achievements, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and relationships.

Many psychologists promote the patriarchal family as an excellent review of the psychoanalytic platform. They promote the patriarchal system which posits that the father plays a central role in the child's formative years, stimulates the superego development, and promotes sex role identification. (Ernest

Jones, 2021:12) It is because of this reason therefore that it can never be fully understood the psycho imbalance that the child will have outside the influence of the father figure. "A boy sexually desires his mother and simultaneously fears his father's retribution" (Jones, 2021: 133) These ideas by Freud and other psychologists may look quite far-fetched but they are realistic and provide the necessary psychological balance in a child.

There is a change of outlook on sexual behavior in the absent father children where they approve of premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce (Jane Anderson. 2003.15). Girls whose fathers left when they were five years old are likely to be sexually active early and often become pregnant as adolescents. As adults, they experience less trust and seem to give up romantic relationships easily and ultimately divorce.

Even though the father had to leave at some point and probably felt that their absence was inconsequential to the growth of the children. The data shows that in many areas of the world where children are left with their mothers alone, it negatively affects the children, especially the girls. The girl seems to define all the other relationships in her life based on the blueprint that her father created in the formative years of her childhood. The absence of the father deprives the girl child of a future life that is well balanced in trusting or mistrusting the other males in their lives. "Unfortunately, in many families, dad never shows up, he might not do anything as radical and overtly damaging as divorcing his wife and moving away from his children but he is just never emotionally present for his children.

(Root, 2015: 121) The presence of the father in an intimate way with the children is important and necessary for every child. Josh Mc Dowell says, "Children often look up to their father for a modeling a good life. These voices all echo one important fact the need for the father in a child. (McDowell, 2008: 6)

According to experts on the subject, the damage that the absence of the father may not be quantified or qualified clinically but indeed the data shows that it's very palpable. Kevin Leman says that this condition is a disorder (Leman 2010:23). This creates a syndrome called Daddy Attention Deficit Disorder, DADD (Ibid). In the short term, the mother may seem to have everything under control but in the long run, the gap begins to manifest itself in more ways than one. Therefore, whether the father is absent due to the unfortunate circumstances of a divorce or death the narrative seems to have the same effects.

Susan Swartz, posits that the absence of a father usually sets up the daughter for anguish and disappointment often killing her creativity and life force, her endeavors are stamped with depression, anxiety, and disturbed relationships (Swartz, 2021:19). The situation of not having a father around creates a psychological situation where the child is set up not to trust anyone, hate and distance themselves from other people. This especially often manifests in future relationships that a girl may have with men if she never had a present father. According to psychologist Carl Jung, not until one makes a conscious decision is often directed one's life and they call it fate (Jung, 1968: 126) ...Quoted in Swartz)

A child who does not know his or her father or whose parents never married often feels disadvantaged because, nobody can glorify a patriarch as much as can a fatherless child (Root, 2010: 121). The fatherless child often has pictures in the mind of what the father should have been or should be and this heroic picture is the one that often creates a negative complex. The question that often arises is why did the hero not come back for me. And the longer this anticipation takes the harder the emotions of the child become. Being a father is not just a biological fact but has psychological and cultural implications (Swartz, 2021.26). It is this emotion that must be addressed well by creating a better environment.

On the other hand, the other aspect of growing up can be accomplished by a child even in the absence of his father. You can successfully help your child learn the important characteristics of independence and control. "He does not need a father to teach him those basic psychological strengths. (Howe, 1999.14) There are breakthrough findings that suggest that children who are cared for by their mothers in a place and conducive environment often have a comparatively equal chance of doing better than those with both parents. This statement though, might not enjoy the blessing of the patriarchal proponents who value the presence of the father as indispensable.

Children acquire fear from their parents and how do children learn to be afraid? Children learn from modeling and imitative learning and they like to imitate adults who are important to them. The way a parent relates with her children is likely to transmit fear to their children (Wright 2005, 44). There is no secret that divorce inflicts trauma and a series of crises on millions of children each year. We need to understand the broad impact divorce has on parents and children (Fagerstrom, 1993:66). The reaction of the father or the mother may instill fear into the child to the point of failing to see themselves according to the real prospects of a good life in their future.

The needs of the single mothers therefore include the proper guidance of their children in the regulation of behavior in the absence of the father. This also includes impressing upon the children's character and social well-being, the proper emotional balance that comes from both parents in the home is an extremely strong source of fear in observational learning- it presents many unrealistic and exaggerated situations that tend to frighten children. Therefore, to succeed in the process of helping children to be balanced requires a balanced parent.

The other source of pressure on the children is the parent's anger. Norman Wright observes that "Our anger carelessly expressed will override the love, care, and appreciation that creates a close relationship with children. Did you know that the problem of anger is a motivator? (Wright:2005: 45). It can motivate you to hate, damage, annihilate, despise, loathe, vilify, curse, ruin, or demolish. Everything that is expressed in the home creates a backdrop of a lot of problems in the life of children especially if negatively expressed. Children in absent-father homes are at greater risk of emotional distress compared to those whose fathers are present.

Sometimes single parents live in denial of their child's anger and they are afraid to confront the anger hoping that it will not erupt again. From a Christian perspective, it is a Biblical requirement always to speak the word of God to your child as he or she is in the mother's womb. Proverbs 22:6, 2 Timothy 3:15 from your childhood you have known the truth. Expert analysis further posits that 'many at times it is difficult for mothers to accept their responsibility of exercising their authority over their children (Harrison 2002: 139). The truth is that they have as much of a part in disciplining their

children as their husbands do. Proverbs 8:14. One of the failures of the mothers is that while they were still married, they did not want to correct their children because there was a thought that it was the duty of the father figure. Now that they are all alone with the children, it becomes more challenging to discipline the children.

One way to manage the single parenting challenge is to “Constantly discipline your children in accordance to God's word (Harrison 2002:137) This is the advice that is given to mothers with or without a husband because it is a parental duty. The neglect of the responsibility of discipline by mothers usually hits back in times of widowhood or even single motherhood. Most of the work is usually regarded as not the mother's duty to the point that it gets out of hand and they become overwhelmed with that angle of life. Every parent is here admonished in every situation, “to cultivate self-discipline in children so that they can grow up with an understanding in the respect of authority. If you love your children completely you will value their discipline Proverbs 13:24. Discipline your child while there is hope Proverbs 19:18, Ephesians 6:4.”

The likely situation is that the single mother will often take out their anger for their life situation on the children. This is because they carry the bitterness of the past and react like victims in this situation. The Bible teaches that, “If you try to correct your children in anger you will run a high risk of disciplining them incorrectly. Perhaps you feel frustrated over some negative things make sure you stay in love as you discipline your child - Proverbs 7:24 “Don't just forget about negative behavior deal with it. (Harrison 2002: 37). The admonishing to single mothers is often that they would just ignore the wrong behavior of their children instead of confrontation. This is usually to avoid seeming pain on the part of the children but by that then the children continue into adverse behavior.

Mothers must first learn who they are in Christ as a mother or wife. Since He created you that way you can know that you can function in that role. (Adams, Milner, Schrepf, 1984. 2). “A mother who is married or single understands the difference with others is the fact that the mother has offspring. The mere fact that someone has children regardless of their current disposition is reason enough to have a clear view of motherhood the idea being advanced by Harrison is that single motherhood is a calling the woman must carry with pride and dignity.

The mother must come to understand and accept what and why God has specifically called her to do in this life before she can fulfill her godly role as a wife or a mother. “Take aught to take care of themselves spiritually and physically without apology and self-pity (Harrison,2002.13) To fulfill the challenge of parenting one must work up to this fact. That means that one has to feed their body and keep their body clean. If the body is unbalanced and unhealthy, it will not function properly. James Dobson states, that mothers have been placed in an impossible bind, they have been blamed for everything that could conceivably go wrong with children (Dobson, 1987:51) Therefore they need to establish themselves as strong individuals for the task.

There is a need the single mothers to focus on their self-image which must take both roles that of the father and the mother herself. Without the self-understanding and the self-acceptance of the single mother, those who are around her find self-pity and anger the way of life. You need to take pride in how you look, how you carry yourself, and how you care for your body. The Bible further counsels in Psalm 127: 3 KJV Children are a heritage from the Lord. Gen 33:5 Isaiah 44:24 it is God who formed you from the womb. God created the Children.

One of the reasons why parenting alone is difficult is that we were never designed for it (Leman, 2006: 13) This fact cannot be ignored neither can it be wished away because the very nature of our being requires that there is a difference in the relevance of both father and mother in the family. Each one functions in the perfect but unique way that they were intended by the creator. Armstrong underpins a unique biblical understanding of the subject in the following statement:

God's plan for the families includes a father and a mother for a purpose. Two heads are better than one. The male and the female perspectives differ and they bring the right balance to the family. Children statistically do better emotionally, socially, and academically when both parents are in the home...God's design for family does not guarantee success but the statistics bear witness that families with both biological parents in the home have a better chance of it (Armstrong, 2010:14).

While single mothers have operated at that level where life has been managed even in the absence of the fathers, it is immensely important to note that absence creates an undeniable imbalance in the home. M. E Lamb has this to say from his study, “The result of my study reinforces the belief that fathers are indeed salient persons in the lives of the infants and that there is a great deal of interaction between fathers and infants, furthermore, there is evidence that the characteristic of the mother interactions differs substantially” (Lamb: 2010.26) The contribution of the father and that of the mother exists at a whole different level and thus regardless of the nature of the singleness and it cannot compare to a ‘father and mother’ home. The difference is still felt. Lamb continues to affirm that, ‘interactions between eight-month-old Children and their fathers and mothers differ. Therefore, the role of the father in child development cannot be over-emphasized.

CONCLUSION

The subject of children that are growing up without a father seems to be a growing concern for many global communities. The many difficulties in life that they go through are not limited to one part of the world. Father deficiency syndrome is complex and affects the psychology of the child including the behavior and responses in later life. Some of the spelled-out issues are crimes, illicit drug abuse, violence, self-hate, lack of self-esteem, peer pressure, and future family and academic failures. The mother assumes the great responsibility of making sure that the environment around the home where children are raised is conducive and balanced, even in the absence of a father figure. The lifestyle for adjustment provides a sociological balance.

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