



## **Socio-Economic Challenges and Psychological Stressors Faced by Single Mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency, Kisumu County, Kenya**

*Pamela Opiyo<sup>1</sup> & Wambua Pius Muasa Ph.D<sup>2</sup>*

**Institute of Youth Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Tangaza University**

### **ABSTRACT**

In Africa and throughout the globe, unemployment among young single mothers has progressively increased in recent years. It has been linked to severe economic and social problems that cause the third-world and emerging world economies to expand more slowly. In Kenya, little focus has been placed on single motherhood and their socio-economic challenges. The study had the following objectives: to examine the socioeconomic challenges faced by young single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency, Kisumu County, Kenya; to identify the psychological stressors resulting from those challenges faced by young single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency, Kisumu County, Kenya. The study employed exploratory research design. A sample size of 15 participants was selected through purposive sampling. Interview Guide was used to collect data among the participants. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed the socio-economic challenges that were faced by young single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency were low income, financial constraints and limited access to government services. The findings showed that single mothers were facing psychological stressors of prejudice and discrimination and absence of father figure in bringing up their children. The study recommends to government to make public services such as medical and education to be accessible to single mothers. Also, the study recommends the need of counsellors and psychologist to sensitize the society towards accepting and supporting single mothers and to stop prejudice and discrimination towards them.

**Key Words: Socio-economic Challenges, Psychological Stressors, Single Mothers, Kisumu Central Constituency**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most single mothers in the United States have very low levels of financial reserves (Lubber et al., 2020). For instance, a third of people in 2019 could not afford a \$400 emergency bill. This is a concern since having savings, even tiny cash levels, is necessary to weather financial hardships. During COVID-19 period, young single moms had high unemployment rates in Europe and the United States and were more likely to leave the workforce than young single dads and women without children. The difficulties they faced were made worse by the problems with access, availability, and cost of childcare (Lubber et al., 2020). When interviewing young single moms in Australia, McKenzie and McKay (2018) found that these mothers endure financial and emotional difficulties that affect their children's conduct and mental health. They deal with issues like homelessness, poverty, and a general lack of education—all of which increase the likelihood of developing mental diseases including depression, stress, and anxiety. Young single moms in industrialized nations are also affected by changes to safety nets such as government programs or help from family and friends (Radey & McWey, 2021).

In a survey conducted in Japan, the majority of the respondents acknowledged increased pressures during the COVID-19 epidemic (Wakai et al., 2023). Financial worries were listed as a key stressor by half of the research participants during the pandemic era. The majority of the single mothers who took part in the survey mentioned that elements contributing to the changes in the workplace environment were job seeking, decreased working hours, and unemployment. Hertz et al. (2019) found that single mothers in Europe reported fewer social connections, which increased stress and impaired coping mechanisms. Although the fact that single-mother households with children had been observed in certain Western countries prior to the epidemic, the unemployment rate for single mothers in the US more than quadrupled during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Single mothers in Japan may feel particularly challenged as a result of the pandemic due to the high relative poverty rate (50.8%) they experience compared to the average for OECD countries (31.9%) (Kramer, 2019). Low rate of income generating activities have immense effects of the mental well-being of Japanese single mothers living in poverty compared to their counterparts in OECD countries.

In addition to gender inequality and sexual discrimination, young single mothers in Africa experience extreme social exclusion and economic marginalization in both official and informal sectors (Raniga, 2018). Sub-Saharan Africa has a growing number of single parent households, with young single moms making about three-quarters of them (Goffman, 2013). Young single mother homes make about 10–30% of households in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, respectively (Chani, 2018). Because of a lack of work, 44.6% of children in South Africa live with a young, single mother and are heavily reliant on state financial transfers (Statistics South Africa, 2018). Compared to two-parent homes, single mothers are far more vulnerable to poverty, financial instability, and psychological pressures. This implies that jobless single mothers face stress associated to poverty, such as food insecurity,

exposure to gender-based violence, difficulties balancing work and family obligations, victimization, and sickness brought on by inadequate sanitation (Raninga & Mthembu, 2016). According to Azuka-Obieke (2013), unemployment, a lack of education, and financial difficulties are the main obstacles to young single mothers in Zimbabwe maintaining a sustainable standard of living.

In low income countries in Africa such as Zimbabwe low level of education among single mother has led to increase in their unemployment rate hence prevalence of poverty among the group is at all time high. According to various studies lack of basic social support, and unemployment were primary psychological stresses that lead to depression, and suicidal thoughts. According to Malaba (2016) poverty prevalence in young single-mothers households escalated to 68% in Zimbabwe.

In Kenya, Young single mothers face drastic socio-economic challenges associated with lack of employment and leaving in abject poverty. Early marriages and teenage pregnancies are the primary causes of single motherhood where more than 21% of the teenagers become pregnant before 20 years. Muranga, Kenya has the highest teenage pregnancies at 40% and 80% of them end up in single motherhood (Ongete et al., 2018). Lorenzini and Giugui (2010) noted that young single mothers who are jobless experience social isolation and a decline in group engagement as a result of their psychological depression and feelings of loneliness. People's mental and psychological healths are often affected, and they often have a gloomy outlook that they will either try suicide or engage in behaviours that would have a detrimental impact on their life. These have a detrimental impact on a person's self-esteem and make them feel like a burden to their family and society. Young individuals who experience social isolation come to believe that they are worthless and incapable of contributing to their families or the wider community. Ongete and colleagues (2020), report that lack of social support from the government, family and friends led to young single mothers feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and depressed when they cannot provide basic need for their children. Ngunjiri (2019), reports that in poverty stricken young single-mother household in Kenya are prone to psychopathic and other behavioural problems.

The study was grounded on Resource Dependency Theory. According to Frank (2018), the resource dependence theory emphasizes the role that country's leaders play in acquiring or supplying crucial resources through their connections to the outside world. Kozlenkova et al. (2014) acknowledge that resource dependence theorists emphasize the nomination of representatives of independent organizations as a tactic to get access to resources vital for business development. Young Single mothers are both underrepresented and have limited access to resources leading to daunting struggles with poverty that leaves them vulnerable to negative effects on their status and self-esteem leading negative outcomes of their mental and physical well-being. The study had the following objectives:

1. To examine socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency, Kisumu County, Kenya
2. To explore psychological stressors emanating from socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency, Kisumu County, Kenya

---

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed an exploratory research design. The research design is used when the researcher aims at exploring the experiences of a particular group of people on a certain phenomenon. The research design was suitable for this study because it aimed at exploring the challenges of socio-economic challenges and psychological stressors faced by single mothers. The study employed purposive sampling technique in order to select information rich cases and people with more information on the topic of interest. Through purposive sampling, a sample size of 15 participants who were single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency and were experiencing socio-economic challenges and psychological stressors were selected to participate in the study.

The study utilized Interview Guide to collect data. The interview guide contained open-ended questions to elicit open responses from the respondents. The interview guide had three sections. The first section captured the demographic information of the participants including age, religion, level of education and number of children. Section two captured open ended questions on socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers and section three captured the psychological stressors faced by single mothers. The study employed thematic analysis to analyze the collected data.

---

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was set out to explore socio-economic challenges and psychological stressors faced by young single mothers in Kisumu-Central Constituency Kisumu, County, Kenya. Using thematic analysis, the themes from the data collected was identified and supported by verbatim from the participants. Also, the discussion of the findings was provided. Before presenting the findings as per the research objectives, the study presented the demographic details of the participants.

### *Demographic Details of the Participants*

The study presented the demographic of the participants. The demographic details for the single mothers who were interviewed captured their age, religion, educational level, number of children and social status. The results are presented in table 1.

**Table 1**

Participant Number	Age	Religion	Educational Level	Number of Children	Social Status
1	27	Christian	Diploma	1	Single
2	23	Christian	Form 4	2	Single
3	36	Christian	Diploma	2	Single
4	25	Christian	Form 4	1	Single
5	34	Christian	Form 4	2	Single
6	20	Christian	BA	1	Single
7	31	Christian	Certificate	2	Single
8	23	Christian	BA	2	Single
9	35	Christian	Form 4	3	Single
10	27	Christian	Form 4	2	Single
11	28	Christian	Diploma	1	Single
12	26	Christian	Form 4	2	Single
13	35	Christian	Form 4	3	Single
14	24	Christian	Diploma	1	Single
15	30	Christian	Form 4	3	Single

Table 1 show that participants were between ages of 20 years to 35 years. All the participants were Christians. Majority of the participants had form 4 level of education. The least of participants had certificate followed by those who had bachelor's degree while several had a diploma in their level of education. Majority of the participants had two children followed by those who had one child.

#### **Socio-economic Challenges faced by Young Single Mothers in Kisumu Constituency**

From the data, the themes of low income, financial constraints and limited access to government services emerged as socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers in Kisumu County.

##### **Low income**

All the participants expressed the challenge of earning low income to meet their daily needs. Some of the participants depend on their parents for bringing up their children and also taking care of their own needs. In addition, all the participants depend on casual work or small business to earn their living. The theme was expressed by a participant, who said,

Now I am still a student so it is my parents who are helping me out with my child, because I am in college and I do not have any income, but during holidays I do cook samosas and sell just to complement a few areas for my child. My mother has been handy in dealing with most of these challenges but whenever I am off school I do cook samosas and sell them within the estate and sometime even take to a nearby market and this helps me to chip in bringing up my child (Participant, 6).

The theme was also supported by another participant who earned low income from casual work when said, *"I do not have any particular thing that I do but I survive on 'kibarua', which are ranging from do laundry for people, cleaning service of people's houses, cars, whichever comes my way and even working on people's farms in the nearby villages"* (Participant 7). In addition, the theme was echoed by another single mother who said, *"I do not have anything specific job I am doing but mine range from doing laundry for people in the morning, and selling samosas at the roadside in the afternoon. That is how I earn my living since I lost my job 6 years ago"* (Participant 13).

The findings of this study concurred with findings of Agnafors et al. (2019), that single mothers are likely to experience poverty and other economic factors such as lack social support and education leading them to have low income and suffer psychological outcomes. In addition, the findings were consistent with findings of Mackenzi and McKay (2018), who conducted a study in Australia with 23 single mothers on their welfare and found that they experienced difficulties in adjusting to harsh conditions as a result of earning low income. The single mothers were more likely to experience economic challenges and emotional challenges compared to those who were supported by the government. The findings were in line with the findings of several researchers (Siphambe, 2007; Nthomang & Diraditsile, 2016) who reported that the rate of employment is highest among the single mothers due to low education and which poses challenges to them in making the ends meet. Furthermore, the findings were consistent with the findings of Lubber et al. (2020), who conducted a study with single mother in United States and found that majority of them had low levels of financial reserves. The same

study found that young single mothers across Europe and the United States experienced high unemployment rates and were more likely to exit labour force compared to young single fathers and women with no children.

### **Financial constraints**

Financial constraint was another theme that emerged from all the participants as a socio-economic challenge faced by single mothers in Kisumu County. The single mothers face financial challenges to meet the basic needs of their children including providing food, clothing, education and paying their medical bills. The theme was expressed by a single mother who said,

One of my problems is how to raise enough finances to take care of my children, so financial problems are my main stressors. Raising my children alone causes me a lot of pain and loneliness, because there are times when the children are asking for something which needed consultation between parents but my other partner is not available, hence the stressor (Participant 7).

The theme was also echoed by another single mother who faced financial challenges of meeting the needs of her children when she said, my main stress is financial constrain, lack of money to maintain the children, because they are very demanding in terms of health and education. I overwork and get very tired because I have to meet their needs for both father and mother (Participant 9). The theme was also emphasized by a another participant who said,

My main stressors are school fees, medicals bills and rent, it has not been easy raising these basic needs for my children. Being a single mother I am very vulnerable to many things, my income is not enough, so I am always very stressed, my children lack fatherly love and protection. As a mother the challenge I have is I am not able to give my children enough attention as I am always running around doing something trying to meet the financial needs (Participant, 10).

The theme was also echoed by another single mother who has experienced numerous stressors of finance in taking care of the children when she said,

I really have stress with my bills because I have to pay rent, pay school fees, medical and food as basics. The economy is bad, so even us who sell food are hit so hard people are no longer eating the way they used to do before. Financial constrain. Myself, I am stressed again because I am lonely because I have no one to consult, and no support (Participant, 12).

The findings were in agreement with the findings of Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009) who found financial crisis to be a major socio-factor affecting the single mothers. The study found that due to financial constraints, single mothers found it difficult to meet the basic needs of their children including food, clothing, education and medical services. Single mothers are the primary wage earners and they are forced to bear the responsibilities of their absentee spouses. Due to limited financial resources, most of young single mothers are always struggling to make ends meet and this can cause them depression and anxiety. Similarly, the findings were in line with the findings of Lu et al. (2019), who conducted a study in United States with single mothers and found 28% of them lived in poverty and were more vulnerable to financial and psychological problems. Furthermore, the findings were in agreement with findings of Radey and McWey (2021) who found that Low-income levels of the young single mothers were associated with low school completion and employment, harsh parenting strategies, stress, and poor physical and mental health.

### **Limited Access to government services**

Majority of the participants expressed the challenge of accessing the government services. As single mothers, sometimes they are not given a priority compared to those who are married. The major challenge they face in accessing government services is based on their economic status because they are not able to pay the services they need. This is expressed by a single mother who felt discriminated as a single mother and not able to access the government services when she said "In most government health clinics, first priority is given to parents who show up with their partners, thus forming a bias against single mothers; stigmatization is still real in government facilities, same to schools where we take children to learn" (Participant, 1).

The theme was also expressed by another single mother who felt difficulty to access the government services because of the payments to be done for the services offered when she said, "Accessing the government services has equally become difficult because even most of them you have to part with some small fees e.g. education we buy books, pay some small fees, so financial strain is felt. When I go to government hospitals or health facilities, there is often no medicine so I still have to use money to buy medicine and medicine is very expensive" (Participant, 2).

The theme was also echoed by another single mother who felt that the government facilities do not have enough medicine and the services they have end up been overcharged and expensive to afford when she said "Yes, there are challenges accessing the key services like education and health services especially from the government. Most public health facilities do not have medicine and most government institutions are also charging some things and they are expensive eg parent buying desks, books and school uniform (Participant 5). Moreover, the theme is supported by another participant who said,

Government services is quiet difficult accessing except for the free primary, which we also end up paying for a few things such as desk, we have to buy books, buy school uniform, and some small fees they call tuition fee, but for medical services, the government facilities around here are more of white elephants because they lack staff and lack medicine (Participant, 15).

The findings were consistent with findings of Ongete and colleagues (2020), who conducted a study in Kisumu County, Kenya and found that lack of social support from the government, family and friends led to young single mothers feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and depressed when they cannot provide basic need for their children.

### **Psychological stressors faced by single young mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency**

From the data, two themes of prejudice and discrimination, and absence of father figure emerged as major psychological stressors to single mothers in Kisumu Central Constituency.

### **Prejudice and discrimination**

All the participants experienced prejudice and discrimination as a result of being single mothers out of wedlock. The Luo culture does not accommodate women who are single as a result of getting children out of wedlock. The society perceives them as immoral and irresponsible in the society. Some are pushed to get married in order to avoid the shame in the society. As a result of being single mother because of getting a child out of wedlock, individuals face numerous stressors in their daily lives. This comes clearly from a single mother, who said,

As a single mother, people tend to think we are not competent enough and the fact that I got my children when I was young makes them think I am not able to take care of the child well. We have been labelled as immoral because of getting child or children out of wedlock. Sometimes we are regarded as rebellious against parents even without finding out what led us to being single mothers. It hurts most when some of them refer to us as home-wreckers, without knowing our fate (Participant, 1).

The theme was mentioned by another participant who considered the Luo society to be very judgemental to single mother even without interest of knowing what led an individual to be a single mother when she said,

The culture and society tends to be very judgmental and tend to value culture more than finding out what one is going through or just try to find out how one became a single mother. There is a lot of discrimination towards single mothers and this causes me /or us a lot of stress as a single mother. The worst part of this is the branding the society is doing to single mothers, we are called all sorts of names, prostitute, home-wrecker, rude, immoral (Participant, 3).

Likewise, the theme was expressed by another single mother who is perceived by the society as a bad role model to other children and labelled as immoral and prostitute in the society when she said,

I am sometimes very stressed because the society think bad about me, some said when I got pregnant that I used to roam around that's why I got pregnant so many of them think I am a bad example, to their children. From the culture I come from anyone who gives birth out of wedlock regardless of what led to it, they will be labelled you as immoral, prostitute, home wrecker and rebellious, so that by itself is a stressor (Participant 6).

The findings were in agreement with the findings of Raninga (2018) who found that single mothers in Africa face immense social discrimination and economic exclusion in both formal and informal economies as a result of gender inequality and sexual discrimination.

### **Absence of father figure**

The absence of father figure emerged as another psychological stressors among the single mothers in Kisumu County. All the participants expressed the challenges of bringing up children alone without their fathers presence and help. Having no father figure, majority of single mothers experience financial constraint and they are not able to meet the basic needs of their children. They also face challenge of instilling discipline to their children and especially the male child. In addition, they face the challenges of answering questions from their children who would want to know their biological fathers. The theme is expressed by a single mother, who said,

It has not been easy on me and being my child, is a male child it is not easy because some areas need a father figure or man to direct him. There is some difficulty raising a child who is not your gender alone. When it comes to discipline, sometimes I am not able to do it well, given that I am the one handling the child most of the time (Participant, 1).

The theme of absence of father figure was also expressed by another single mother who has experienced financial constraint and difficulty in handling discipline of the children when she said,

Most people view us as lesser parents not parent enough just because we are single, disciplining children becomes a problem as a single parent becomes a challenge, for you are the same one handling the child all the time. Financial constraint is a real stressor for me, for most of the time, what I earn from my business is not enough for my bills. There is a lot of financial constraint on me as a single parent; it's not easy feeding for my children single handily. Disciplining the children becomes a challenge when you are a single parent. The other challenge for me is that I feel my children lack parental love of their father and this stresses me a lot (Participant, 3).

The theme was echoed by another single mother who expressed feelings of loneliness whenever the children would ask her about their father and also not been able to meet the financial obligation when she said,

I am stressed and feel lonely especially when they are asking for the father and why he is not coming home, it is more stressing for me because I cannot meet all the financial obligations alone. There many things parents need to consult with their partners but look he is not here and I'm not able to reach him (Participant, 13).

The same stress of been asked by the children about their father and the burden of bringing children alone was also expressed by another single mother when she said,

The responsibility is a lot for one parent, I feel the burden to be heavy for me, again sometime the child starts demanding that he wants to see the father. The stress starts because I do not know how to explain to him, he is still young and cannot understand. Personally, I go through loneliness and anxiety especially when I am not able to cater for medical bills for my child (Participant, 14).

The findings were in line with findings of Clark et al. (2023), who found that in Kenya young single mothers living in slums are facing lower levels of instrumental assistance with childcare and financial help which leads to a stress as they struggle to meet dual roles as primary care givers and economic providers. Furthermore, the findings were supported by the findings of Husain et al. (2016) who conducted a hospital-based survey with young single mother with children under the age of five in Kenya suggested that, single mothers are as twice as likely to report psychological distress compared to their married counterparts.

---

## CONCLUSION

The study concluded that single mothers in Kisumu County Kenya are facing socio-economic challenges of low income. The single mothers face financial challenges to meet the basic needs of their children including providing food, clothing, education and paying their medical bills. They also face the challenge of accessing government services. They experience prejudice and discrimination as a result of been single mothers out of wedlock which is manifested in been labelled and considered irresponsible in the society. Single mothers meet challenge of bringing up their children in the absence of father figure and especially in basic needs and instilling discipline.

## REFERENCES

---

- Azuka-Obieke, U. (2013). *Single parenting, psychological well-being and academic performance of adolescents*. Nigeria: University of Lagos.
- Chani, C. (2018). Informal cross-border trade: A review of its impact on household poverty reduction in Zimbabwe. East London: University of Fort Hare. (M thesis)
- Clark, S., Henderson, M., & Kabiru, C. (2023). Single Motherhood and Stress in a Kenyan Slum: The Importance of Paternal and Kin Support. *Journal of Family Issues*, 0192513X221150978.
- Frank, A. G. (2018). The development of underdevelopment. In *Promise of development* (pp. 111-123). Routledge.
- Giugni, M., and Lorenzini, J. (2010). Employment Situation, Social Capital, and Political Participation: A Survey of Unemployed and Precarious Youth in Geneva. Paper presented at the seminar on Economic/Social Exclusion and Collective Action: Asia and Europe Compared, Limerick, 16-17 September. Available: [http://www.younex.unige.ch/Products/Workingpapers/Employment\\_socialcapital\\_politicalparticipation.pdf](http://www.younex.unige.ch/Products/Workingpapers/Employment_socialcapital_politicalparticipation.pdf) [January 2014].
- Goffman, I. (2013). *Single mothers and their children: A new American dilemma*. Washington, Dc: Urban Institute Press.
- Husain, N., Mukherjee, I., Notiar, A., Alavi, Z., Tomenson, B., Hawa, F., Malik, A., Ahmed, A., & Chaudhry, N. (2016). Prevalence of common mental disorders and its association with life events and social support in mothers attending a well-child clinic: Findings from Mombasa, Kenya. *SAGE Open*, 6(4), 215824401667732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016677324>
- Kotwal, N & Prabhakar, B. (2009). Problem faced by Single Mothers. *Journal of Sciences*, 21(3), 197-204
- Kozlenkova, I. V., Samaha, S. A., & Palmatier, R. W. (2014). Resource-based theory in marketing. *Journal of the academy of marketing science*, 42, 1-21.
- Lubbers, M. J., García, H. V., Castaño, P. E., Molina, J. L., Casellas, A., & Rebollo, J. G. (2020). Relationships stretched thin: Social support mobilization in poverty. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 689(1), 65-88.
- Malaba, J. (2016). Poverty measurement and gender: Zimbabwe's experience. Inter- agency and expert group meeting on the development of gender statistics. United Nations: New York.
- McKenzie, H., & McKay, F. H. (2018). Thinking outside the box: Strategies used by low-income single mothers to make ends meet. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 53(3), 304-319.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2014). Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion: Measuring Dimensions of Social Capital to Inform Policy. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18831>.
- Ngunjiri, E., M. (2019). Evaluation of factors affecting implementation of green public procurement governments in laikipia county government, Kenya. *International Journal of Professional Business Review*, 4 (1), 128-137. DOI - 10.26668/businessreview/2019.v4i1.91
- Ongete, H; Achieng A. L & Aloka, P. (2020). Demographic Factors and Social Support on Depression among High School Teenage Mothers in Kisumu East Sub-County, Kisumu County Kenya. *Journal of Popular Education in Africa*. 4(4), 35 – 47.
- Raday, M., & McWet, L. (2021). Safety nets, Maternal mental health, and Child Mental Health Outcomes Among Mother Living in Poverty. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30(3), 687-689. Web.

- 
- Raniga T. (2018). Poverty alleviation, social protection policy and sustainability of economic development co-operatives: Voices of women residing in Bhambayi, Kwa Zulu-Natal, South Africa. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 54(4), 395- 406
- Raniga, T. & Mthembu, M. (2016). Family resilience in low income communities: A case study of an informal settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, August 2016. doi: 10.1111/ijsw.12243
- Wakai, H., Nawa, N., Yamaoka, Y., & Fujiwara, T. (2023). Stressors and coping strategies among single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Plos one*, 18(3), e0282387.