



Social Acceptability and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being of Single Mothers in Rural Kenya: A Mixed-Methods Study

Kiprono Cheruiyot David¹, Joyzy Pius Egunjobi¹, Emmanuel Bizimaziki²

Psycho-Spiritual Institute of Lux Terra, Marist International University College, Tangaza University

ABSTRACT

Single motherhood in rural Kenya is often accompanied by intense societal stigma, economic hardship, and limited institutional support. Yet, little research has explored how these social dynamics influence the psycho-spiritual health of this vulnerable population. This study investigated the relationship between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in Ndanai Parish, a rural community within the Kericho Diocese of Bomet County, Kenya. The sample size comprised 307 single mothers aged 15–35 years, selected through stratified random sampling for the quantitative phase, and 10 single mothers purposively selected for the qualitative phase based on their willingness to share in-depth experiences and represent varied socio-religious backgrounds; these participants were not part of the quantitative sample. An embedded mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected using two validated tools: the Social Acceptance of Single Motherhood Scale (SASMS) and the 25-item Psycho-Spiritual Well-being Scale (P-SWBS). Findings showed that 54.7% of respondents experienced moderate social acceptability (mean SASMS score = 57.14). Overall psycho-spiritual well-being scores were high. A statistically significant and strong positive correlation was found between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being ($r = .649, p < .01$), suggesting that higher perceived social support was associated with better emotional and spiritual health. Qualitative findings showed that faith is a critical coping mechanism and stigma is a strong source of isolation.

Keywords: single motherhood, social stigma, psycho-spiritual well-being, Ndanai Parish

Background

Single motherhood in sub-Saharan Africa is often accompanied by multidimensional challenges, including economic hardship, social stigma, and limited institutional support (Mkhize et al., 2022). In Kenya, approximately 32% of women aged 15–35 are single mothers, with rural regions like Ndanai Parish reflecting some of the most underserved and under-researched populations (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2021). Despite this demographic's growing visibility, there is a dearth of empirical research exploring the intersection between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being in rural Kenyan contexts. Psycho-spiritual well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing self-awareness, connectedness, and a sense of purpose (Egunjobi et al., 2023). It plays a critical role in coping with adversity, especially in culturally and religiously embedded communities. However, negative societal perceptions of single motherhood can compromise this well-being, often manifesting as emotional distress, social isolation, and reduced self-worth.

The phenomenon of single motherhood has increasingly become prominent in Ndanai Parish, Kericho Diocese, Kenya, posing social and pastoral challenges due to prevailing negative perceptions rooted in cultural and religious norms. This study investigated the relationship between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers, a group that frequently faced stigma, marginalization, and socio-economic hardship. Despite global recognition of single motherhood as a pressing concern affecting over 15% of households globally (United Nations, 2020) there remained a significant research gap in understanding how social perceptions influenced the inner well-being of single mothers, particularly in rural Kenyan settings.

In Kenya, about 32% of women who had become single mothers often faced systemic barriers such as reduced access to education, emotional distress, and economic instability (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Within Ndanai Parish, such young mothers were socially viewed as deviants from moral norms. This research explored how social acceptability defined as inclusion, empathy, and rejection shaped their psychological and spiritual coping mechanisms. Previous research (Nelson, 2019; Taylor, 2011) had emphasized that community support significantly enhanced the mental well-being of single mothers. Conversely, stigma and exclusion were linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety. International and Kenyan studies cited highlighted the urgency for supportive structures that could improve the self-esteem, spiritual health, and resilience of single mothers.

The study ultimately aimed to fill a significant research gap by examining how societal attitudes affected the psycho-spiritual outcomes of single mothers in rural Kenya, with the goal of informing community interventions, Church pastoral strategies, and public policy aimed at improving their overall well-being by answering the following research questions:

1. What is the level of social acceptability of single mothers among the community in Ndanai Parish, Kericho Diocese, Bomet County, Kenya?

2. What is the level of psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in Ndanai Parish, Kericho Diocese, Bomet County, Kenya?
3. How does social acceptability relate with the psycho-spiritual well-being of single mothers in Ndanai Parish, Kericho Diocese, Bomet County, Kenya.
4. What are the potential strategies for enhancing psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in Ndanai Parish, Kericho Diocese, Bomet County, Kenya?

Methodology

This study adopted an embedded mixed-methods design to examine the relationship between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in rural Kenya, organized around three key research questions: (1) What is the level of social acceptability of single mothers in Ndanai Parish? (2) What is the level of psycho-spiritual well-being among these mothers? (3) How does social acceptability relate to psycho-spiritual well-being?

For the quantitative phase, 307 single mothers aged 18 to 35 years in Ndanai Parish, Bomet County, were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across age groups and village clusters. The Social Acceptance of Single Motherhood Scale (SASMS) and the Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS) were used as standardized instruments. SASMS (15 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) assessed perceived social support, community acceptance, and self-perception, while P-SWBS (25 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) measured self-awareness, connectedness, compassion, purpose, and self-transcendence. Responses for both scales were captured using a 5-point Likert scale.

Demographic data summarized showed that participants were predominantly in the 23–27 age group, with most having primary or secondary education and a high proportion unemployed or engaged in casual labor. The majority had one or two children, and reasons for single motherhood included abandonment, separation, divorce, and widowhood.

The qualitative phase involved 10 purposively selected participants representing diverse ages, educational levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, and experiences of social acceptance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in private settings, each lasting 45–60 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, applying descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and Pearson correlation to assess relationships between variables. Thematic analysis of qualitative data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework to derive themes reflecting participants' experiences and coping strategies.

This integrated approach allowed the study to quantify associations while deeply exploring individual narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of how social acceptability impacts psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in Ndanai Parish.

Findings

Levels of Social Acceptability

The study revealed varying levels of social acceptability among single mothers in Ndanai Parish. Based on responses from the Social Acceptance of Single Motherhood Scale (SASMS):

High acceptance: 17.9% (n = 55)

Moderate acceptance: 68.4% (n = 210)

Severe stigma (low acceptance): 13.7% (n = 42)

These figures indicate that while a majority experienced moderate acceptance, a significant portion still faced severe stigma from their communities. Family and church groups were identified as the main sources of social support, while institutions such as schools and health centers were reported to play minimal roles in supporting single mothers.

Qualitative interviews revealed two key themes: "Spiritual resilience through faith" and "Isolation and structural discrimination." While many participants relied on faith as a coping mechanism, they also faced systemic exclusion in economic and social settings. The findings highlighted that although spirituality provided strength, limited social acceptance and marginalization significantly impacted connectedness and overall psycho-spiritual well-being.

P-SWBS Scores

Domain	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Total	Domain Means T/5
Awareness	4.0749	4.1401	4.1336	4.1466	3.7785	20.2737	4.0547
Connectedness	3.5212	3.7231	3.7818	4.1173	4.4853	19.6287	3.9257
Meaningfulness	3.4235	4.0423	4.1661	4.1824	3.8306	19.6449	3.9289
Compassion	3.9121	4.1075	4.3485	4.2248	4.3029	20.8958	4.1792
Self-Transcendence	3.7296	3.6808	3.7166	4.0749	4.0195	19.2214	3.8443

Note: T/5 represents the average of all five-domain means

Total of all domain means:

$$4.0547 + 3.9257 + 3.9289 + 4.1792 + 3.8443 = 19.9328$$

$$\text{Overall mean} = 19.9328 \div 5 = 3.9866$$

Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Domain Scores

Domain	Awareness	Connectedness	Meaningfulness	Compassion	Self-Transcendence	Overall Mean
Mean Score	4.05	3.93	3.93	4.18	3.84	3.99

Interpretation Scale for P-SWBS Scores

Subset	Total (T/5)	Mean Score	Level
Awareness	20.27	4.05	High
Connectedness	19.63	3.93	High
Meaningfulness	19.64	3.93	High
Compassion	20.90	4.18	High
Self-Transcendence	19.22	3.84	High
Overall	19.93	3.99	High

Source: Egunjobi et al. (2023)

The results of the Psycho-Spiritual Well-being Scale (P-SWBS), supported by qualitative interviews, indicate that single mothers in Ndanai Parish generally exhibit a high level of psycho-spiritual well-being, with an overall mean score of 3.99. Across the five domains, Awareness (4.05), Connectedness (3.93), Meaningfulness (3.93), Compassion (4.18), and Self-Transcendence (3.84) all recorded high scores, reflecting strong self-understanding, community ties, and compassion, although spiritual transcendence remained relatively lower.

Qualitative insights revealed that social acceptability significantly influences well-being: mothers who felt accepted experienced stronger connectedness and meaning, while stigma hindered self-compassion and spiritual growth. Participants highlighted the importance of community support and faith as key coping mechanisms. The findings emphasize that fostering social acceptance is crucial to enhancing the psycho-spiritual health of single mothers. This aligns with Egunjobi et al. (2023), who advocated for creating supportive environments to promote holistic well-being.

Correlations between SASMS scales of Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS)

Correlations		SASMS_Scale	PSWBS_Scale
SASMS_Scale	Pearson Correlation	1	.649**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	307	307
PSWBS_Scale	Pearson Correlation	.649**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	307	307

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Relationship between Social Acceptability and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between social acceptability (SASMS scores) and psycho-spiritual well-being (P-SWBS scores), with a correlation coefficient of $r = .649$, $p < .01$. This indicates that higher levels of social acceptance were significantly associated with greater psycho-spiritual well-being, particularly in domains such as self-awareness and self-transcendence.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative interviews with 10 single mothers identified two major themes:

Spiritual resilience through faith: Many participants described relying on their faith as a critical source of emotional and spiritual strength. Several noted that prayer and church involvement provided a sense of hope and meaning, helping them endure social challenges.

Isolation and structural discrimination: Despite spiritual resilience, participants described facing systemic exclusion in economic activities and social gatherings. Discrimination from community members, coupled with limited institutional support, created a sense of isolation. One participant explained, "I feel close to God, but the community keeps me at a distance; they think I have failed morally."

Discussion

The study revealed that most single mothers in Ndanai Parish experienced moderate social acceptance, with only a few enjoying high support and a notable minority facing severe stigma. The strong positive correlation found ($r = .649$, $p < .01$) confirmed that higher social acceptance was strongly associated with better psycho-spiritual well-being, particularly in self-awareness and self-transcendence.

These findings align with past studies in Africa and globally, which showed that community support reduces psychological distress and enhances spiritual health. However, low levels of connectedness indicated persistent social isolation despite strong personal faith and inner resilience.

Qualitative interviews reinforced this, highlighting that while faith provided inner strength, external stigma and economic exclusion limited overall well-being.

Overall, the study emphasized the need for community-level interventions to reduce stigma, alongside individual empowerment, to improve the psycho-spiritual well-being of single mothers in rural Kenya.

Conclusion:

This study explored the link between social acceptability and psycho-spiritual well-being among single mothers in rural Kenya, revealing a strong positive relationship between perceived social acceptance and well-being particularly in self-awareness and self-transcendence. Despite high spiritual resilience, many participants reported low connectedness due to ongoing stigma and economic marginalization. The findings emphasize the need for inclusive, community-based interventions that integrate spiritual, emotional, and economic support. The study recommends collaboration among faith-based organizations, community leaders, and policymakers to reduce stigma and enhance support systems, with future research suggested to examine long-term impacts.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen community-based support systems:

The study recommends that local churches, community groups, and leaders develop inclusive programs to reduce stigma and enhance acceptance of single mothers. This can include faith-based workshops, community dialogues, and peer support groups that highlight positive narratives and foster collective responsibility.

2. Promote economic empowerment initiatives:

To address the low connectedness and economic exclusion identified, the study suggests introducing targeted skills training and micro-enterprise programs for single mothers. Empowering them economically can enhance their sense of self-worth, reduce dependency, and improve overall psycho-spiritual well-being.

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