



Prevalence of Stress among Single Mothers in Kayole Sub- County, Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The level of stress experienced by single mothers is a significant issue that affects their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This stress is influenced by various factors, including financial constraints, lack of social support, work-life balance, and societal expectations. The aim of the study was to examine the prevalence of stress among single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The study was grounded on perceived stress theory. The study employed descriptive research design. The study targeted 390 single mothers, with a sample size of 210 selected through cluster sampling. Data was collected using Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and particularly the mean with SPSS. The study found that the overall mean score of 1.99 (SD = 0.637) on the Perceived Stress Scale indicates that, on average, single mothers in the sample reported experiencing moderate stress. Among the individual items, the highest mean score (M = 2.04) was recorded for feeling overwhelmed, indicating that a significant number of respondents regularly experience a sense of emotional overload. Conversely, the lowest mean scores were found in feelings of nervousness/stress and anger due to uncontrollable events (M = 1.96 each), suggesting a relatively lower—though still present—emotional reactivity to external pressures. The reversed item on feeling confident in handling personal problems also scored a mean of 2.00, reflecting a balanced perception of coping ability. The standard deviation across items (approx. SD = 0.637) reflects moderate variability in stress levels, indicating some divergence in individual experiences. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of targeted psychosocial support programs to mitigate chronic stress and improve wellbeing among single mothers in resource-constrained settings.

Key Words: Prevalence, stress, single mothers, Kayole, Nairobi, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The level of stress experienced by single mothers is a significant issue that affects their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This stress is influenced by various factors, including financial constraints, lack of social support, work-life balance, and societal expectations. Empirical research on this topic provides a deep understanding of how single mothers, across different geographical settings, navigate the complexities of parenthood while managing multiple roles (Jackson & Choi, 2018).

At the global level, single mothers experience high levels of stress due to the combination of economic challenges, social stigma, and the demands of raising children alone. A study in UK by Deater-Deckard and colleagues (2021) revealed that single mothers often face more stress compared to their partnered counterparts, largely due to the pressures of managing both financial and caregiving responsibilities. The study identified that the lack of a partner for emotional and financial support often exacerbates the stress levels of single mothers, leading to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. Another significant factor contributing to stress among single mothers globally is the lack of affordable childcare services. A study in UK by Kinnunen and colleagues (2023) revealed that single mothers worldwide are more likely to face difficulty in accessing quality childcare, which compounds their work-related stress. These women are often forced to balance full-time employment with childcare, leading to heightened stress levels. Furthermore, the social stigma associated with single motherhood in many societies worldwide creates additional emotional strain. This stigma may manifest as societal judgment, which can affect self-esteem and increase feelings of isolation (Jackson & Choi, 2018).

Studies have also highlighted the varying levels of support available to single mothers across different countries, which impact their stress levels. In Scandinavian, Norström et al. (2021) found that there is a robust social welfare system, single mothers report lower stress levels, as they have access to financial support, childcare, and healthcare. In contrast, single mothers in countries with weaker social safety nets experience greater stress due to the lack of these resources. These global disparities underline the importance of social policies and government support systems in reducing stress among single mothers. To further analyze these dynamics, Clark, Henderson, and Kabiru (2023) found that in USA social support, coping strategies, parenting beliefs, and child characteristics moderate stress level among single mothers. Richter and Lemola (2017) operationalize parenting stress as the perceived discrepancy between parenting demands and available coping resources. This stress not only influences parent-child interactions but also shapes the emotional climate of the family and the parent's mental health. Additionally, parenting stress determines the choice of parenting style, outlining the pattern of attitudes and behaviours directed towards the child (Richter & Lemola, 2017).

Arguing that parenting stress is a pivotal determinant of single mothers' behaviour, Jackson and Scheines (2021) and Johansson and Nordström (2021) assert that the continuous balancing of multiple roles heightens stress levels, subsequently impacting parenting styles and leading to potential inconsistencies in discipline or emotional availability, thereby affecting children's socio-emotional development. On the continental level, the stress

experienced by single mothers varies significantly between regions, shaped by economic, cultural, and social factors. In Europe, single motherhood is increasingly common, with a growing recognition of the challenges faced by these mothers. A study conducted by Nielsen et al. (2022) in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland showed that single mothers in these countries tend to report higher stress levels than their partnered counterparts, mainly due to financial pressures and the challenge of managing work-life balance. However, these countries provide comprehensive social welfare programs, which help mitigate the impact of stress by offering financial assistance and access to healthcare services. In Latin America, single mothers face a unique set of challenges that contribute to high levels of stress. A study by González and Vega (2021) in Mexico revealed that single mothers in this region experience stress not only due to financial constraints but also due to the societal pressure to conform to traditional family structures. Many single mothers in Latin America face a lack of adequate social support, which intensifies their feelings of isolation and stress. In addition, economic instability in many Latin American countries creates barriers to stable employment and access to healthcare, contributing to increased stress levels among single mothers. In Africa, the experience of single mothers is marked by cultural norms, poverty, and inadequate access to healthcare and social services. Research by Akinmoladun and Akinmoladun (2022) in Nigeria highlighted that single mothers in many African countries are more likely to experience high levels of stress due to poverty, lack of social support, and cultural expectations regarding marriage and family. Single motherhood is often stigmatized in African societies, leading to feelings of shame and emotional distress. Moreover, these mothers often face financial challenges due to the lack of formal employment opportunities, which exacerbates their stress. The absence of formal childcare services in many African countries further compounds these challenges, as single mothers must rely on extended family or informal childcare arrangements. In a quantitative analysis across 35 African countries, Ntoimo and Chadoka-Mutanda (2020) identified the prevalence and associated factors of single motherhood, highlighting the heightened deprivation experienced by single mothers and their children in areas such as education, health, nutrition, and living standards. The study emphasizes the necessity for targeted strategies to address the unique challenges faced by single mothers. Comparative research conducted by Yusuf et al. (2020) in Egypt scrutinized the parenting behaviours of single and cohabiting mothers. The study revealed that single mothers exhibited higher levels of psychological control and lower involvement with their adolescent children, contributing to higher rates of externalizing disorders. The study underscores the potential benefits of interventions targeting parenting styles and emotional support to enhance the well-being of adolescents raised by single mothers. Similarly, a study conducted in Ghana by Ayebeng et al. (2022) highlighted high levels of parental stress and isolation reported by single mothers, emphasizing the need for community-based support services and interventions tailored to address the unique concerns of single mothers and their children. In Swaziland, Matsai and Raniga (2021) explored the experiences of single mothers, revealing challenges such as financial hardship, emotional stress, social isolation, and lack of support. The study recommended increased counselling and guidance to boost the self-esteem of single mothers and assist them in coping with the associated negative emotions. At the local level, the stress experienced by single mothers can be shaped by community dynamics, local government policies, and socioeconomic conditions. In many developing countries, the local context plays a significant role in determining the stress levels of single mothers. For example, in Kenya, a study by Wambui and colleagues (2023) found that single mothers experience high stress levels due to financial instability, lack of formal childcare, and cultural expectations regarding the role of women as primary caregivers. The absence of a strong social safety net exacerbates these stressors, and many single mothers in Kenya are forced to rely on extended family networks or informal economic activities to survive. In urban areas, the stress experienced by single mothers is often compounded by the fast-paced lifestyle and high cost of living. A study by Gathara and Mbugua (2023) in Nairobi found that single mothers in urban settings experience elevated stress levels due to the combined pressures of work, childcare, and the rising cost of living. The lack of affordable housing and childcare options adds to their financial burden, creating a cycle of stress that is difficult to break. This research also highlighted the importance of community support systems, with local women's groups and non-governmental organizations providing some relief in the form of emotional support and small financial grants. In contrast, rural single mothers in Kenya, while facing similar financial challenges, may experience lower stress levels due to stronger social support networks. In rural areas, extended families often provide childcare support, which allows single mothers to engage in economic activities with less worry. However, these mothers still face significant stressors related to poverty and limited access to healthcare and educational opportunities for their children (Nguni et al., 2023). Local government policies also play a crucial role in shaping the stress levels of single mothers. In areas where social welfare programs are absent or poorly implemented, single mothers tend to report higher stress levels. Conversely, in regions where local governments provide financial assistance, healthcare, and childcare, single mothers experience lower levels of stress. For instance, in South Africa, where there are government programs that provide financial aid to single mothers, stress levels are comparatively lower than in other parts of Africa where such assistance is lacking (Mthembu et al., 2021).

Cohen (1983) Perceived Stress Theory is critical theoretical framework for understanding how stress can impact single mothers' parenting styles. According to this theory, perceived stress is the feeling that one's resources are insufficient to meet the demands placed on them. In the context of single mothers in Kayole, perceived stress is likely to arise from the daily demands of managing a household, raising children alone, and possibly working multiple jobs. The perception that one's resources whether financial, emotional, or social are inadequate to meet these demands can lead to chronic stress. Chronic stress, as suggested by Cohen (1983), can have a debilitating effect on a mother's mental and physical health, which may, in turn, influence her parenting style. High perceived stress can result in negative parenting behaviours, such as irritability, emotional withdrawal, or authoritarianism, which may reflect an inability to respond to children with empathy or sensitivity. Conversely, mothers with lower perceived stress, perhaps due to effective coping mechanisms or access to social support, may be more likely to adopt authoritative or nurturing parenting styles, which are associated with positive child outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The aim of the study was to examine the prevalence of stress among single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed descriptive research design with aim of understanding the prevalence of stress among single mothers in Kayole. The study was undertaken in Kayole, a Sub-County located in the eastern part of Nairobi, Kenya. Kayole is a densely populated residential area characterized by a mix of middle to low-income households. It lies approximately 15 kilometers from Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD) and is bordered by areas such as Umoja and Njiru. The population of Kayole has been steadily growing due to both its accessibility and relatively affordable housing. According to

the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Kayole falls under the larger statistics of the Njiru Division, with an estimated population of over 200,000 people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The Sub-County, known for its vibrant but challenging urban setting, experiences both socio-economic disparities and a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Many households in Kayole are headed by single mothers, who face unique challenges in balancing parenting responsibilities with financial and emotional stress. The area is home to various educational institutions, health facilities, markets, and informal settlement zones, which are crucial to understanding the living conditions that influence the stress levels and parenting styles of single mothers. The study targets single mothers aged 21 and above, representing diverse educational backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and occupational roles. These participants provided valuable insights into their parenting styles. The target population was 390. The researcher adopted a clustered sampling technique, specifically single-stage cluster sampling, to ensure representativeness and accessibility. The first step involved defining the clusters based on geographical locations within Kayole Sub-county, where single mothers reside. These clusters represented the groups of single mothers from various neighbourhoods. The researchers ensure that each cluster is proportionately represented in the sample by considering the population of single mothers in each area. The total number of each cluster was calculated to give all participants equal opportunities to be chosen. A sample size of 210 participants was selected to participate in the study. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: a demographic section to gather basic demographic data from respondents which included age, religion, academic level and number of children. The second section collected data on parenting styles using Perceived Stress Scale. Participants provided their responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never | 2 = Rarely | 3 = Sometimes | 4 = Often | 5 = Very Often | 6 = Always. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics specifically the mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages to describe the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study examined the prevalence of stress among single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The demographic of the participants were presented followed by the findings of the study.

Demographic Details of the Participants

The study captured the demographic of the participants including age, religion, academic level and number of children. The demographic of the participants are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic of the Participants

Age		
	N	%
18-24	18	8.7%
25-30	40	19.3%
31-36	54	26.1%
37-42	52	25.1%
43-48	33	15.9%
49-54	10	4.8%
Religion		
	N	%
Christian	78	37.7%
Muslim	77	37.2%
Hindu	13	6.3%
Others	39	18.8%
Academic Level		
	N	%
Primary School	19	9.2%
Form IV/ Secondary School	29	14.0%
Certificate/Artisan	60	29.0%
Diploma	49	23.7%
Bachelor's Degree	40	19.3%
Masters/PhD	10	4.8%
Number of children		
	N	%
0	16	7.7%
1	28	13.5%
2	60	29.0%
3	47	22.7%
4	35	16.9%
5	17	8.2%
6	2	1.0%
7	2	1.0%

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The findings in table 1 show that more than half of the respondents were between the ages of 31–42 years (51.2%), suggesting a mature and potentially experienced population of single mothers. A balanced religious distribution was noted, with Christians (37.7%) and Muslims (37.2%) nearly equally represented, while 18.8% identified with other religions. Academically, most respondents had post-secondary qualifications, with Certificate/Artisan (29%) and Diploma holders (23.7%) forming the largest groups, indicating a moderately educated sample. Only 4.8% had postgraduate education. In terms of parental responsibility, the majority had two or more children, with 29% having two and 22.7% having three children. Only 7.7% had no children, reinforcing the study's relevance to the parenting context. Overall, the demographic data depict a predominantly middle-aged, moderately educated, and religiously diverse group of single mothers.

Prevalence of Stress among Single Mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya

To assess the prevalence of stress experience by single mothers, the research adopted Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), designed to assess stress levels. The respondents were asked to rate how often they have experienced the following feelings over the last month. Scale: 0 = Never | 1 = Almost Never | 2 = Sometimes | 3 = Fairly Often | 4 = Very Often. The figure 1 shows the analysis of the frequency distributions.

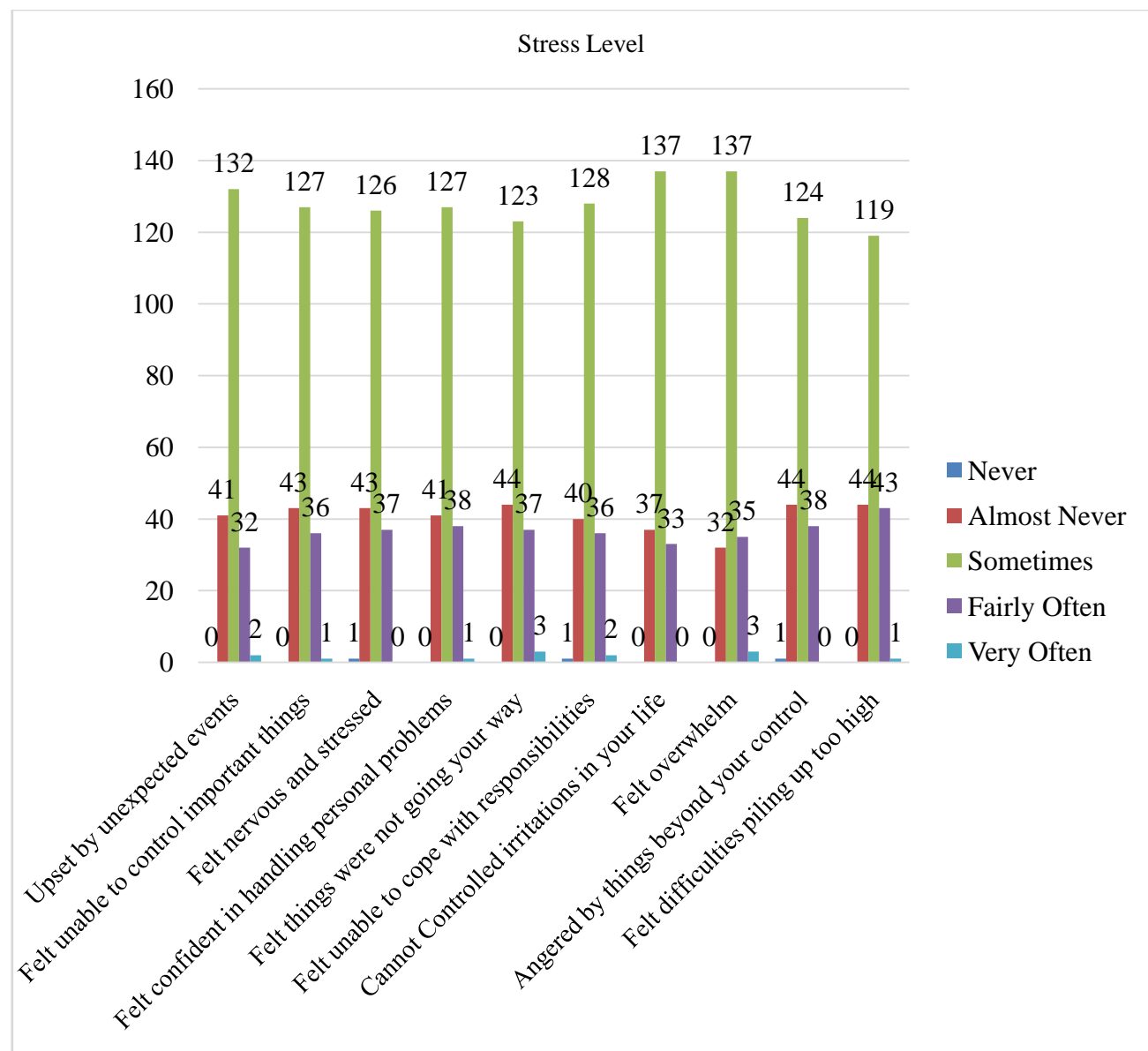


Figure 1: Frequency distribution of perceived stress

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The Figure 1 presents the frequency distribution of responses to the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale among single mothers. The most common response across all items is "Sometimes" (gray bars), indicating that stress-related experiences are frequent but not overwhelming for most respondents. Notably,

the highest frequency for "Sometimes" was recorded for the item "Felt overwhelmed" (137), suggesting that emotional overload is a central stressor. This aligns with literature indicating that single mothers often face cumulative responsibilities without adequate support (Lee & Oyserman, 2023).

Items such as "Felt confident in handling personal problems" and "Felt things were not going your way" also had high counts for "Sometimes" (126 and 127 respectively), pointing to moderate self-efficacy and common experiences of daily frustration. Very few respondents selected "Never" or "Very Often" for any item, demonstrating that stress experiences among single mothers are neither minimal nor consistently severe, but rather moderate and situational. Interestingly, positive coping items (e.g., "Felt confident in handling personal problems") show fewer responses in "Fairly Often" or "Very Often", implying limited but present resilience. Overall, the pattern indicates a population under persistent, moderate stress consistent with findings in low-income or single-parenting environments (Mutua et al., 2021). The data highlight the need for psychosocial interventions aimed at enhancing stress management and resilience among single mothers.

Table 2: Perceived stress among single mothers

Items	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
Upset by unexpected events	207	3	1.98	.627
Felt unable to control important things	207	3	1.98	.634
Felt nervous and stressed	207	3	1.96	.637
Felt confident in handling personal problems (reverse-scored)	207	3	2.00	.635
Felt things were not going your way	207	3	2.00	.672
Felt unable to cope with responsibilities	207	4	1.99	.654
Cannot Controlled irritations in your life	207	2	1.98	.583
Felt overwhelm	207	3	2.04	.618
Angered by things beyond your control	207	3	1.96	.645
Felt difficulties piling up too high	207	3	2.00	.665
Overall			1.99	.637

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The study found that the overall mean score of 1.99 (SD = 0.637) on the Perceived Stress Scale indicates that, on average, single mothers in the sample reported experiencing moderate stress. This average suggests that stressors were felt "sometimes" to "fairly often" across the 10 items, based on the scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Among the individual items, the highest mean score (M = 2.04) was recorded for feeling overwhelmed, indicating that a significant number of respondents regularly experience a sense of emotional overload. This aligns with existing research that highlights the disproportionate caregiving and economic burdens borne by single mothers (Leung & Zhang, 2021).

Conversely, the lowest mean scores were found in feelings of nervousness/stress and anger due to uncontrollable events (M = 1.96 each), suggesting a relatively lower—though still present—emotional reactivity to external pressures. The reversed item on feeling confident in handling personal problems also scored a mean of 2.00, reflecting a balanced perception of coping ability. The standard deviation across items (approx. SD = 0.637) reflects moderate variability in stress levels, indicating some divergence in individual experiences. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of targeted psychosocial support programs to mitigate chronic stress and improve wellbeing among single mothers in resource-constrained settings.

CONCLUSION

The study illuminates the reality that single mothers in Kayole Sub-County experience persistent, moderate levels of psychological stress, with emotional overwhelm emerging as their primary challenge. This pattern suggests that these mothers are managing multiple competing demands and responsibilities without adequate support systems, leading to chronic but manageable stress rather than acute psychological crisis. The prevalence of feeling overwhelmed indicates that single mothers are struggling with the cumulative burden of parenting, economic provision, household management, and personal wellbeing without sufficient resources or assistance. The moderate nature of their stress suggests remarkable resilience and coping capacity, as these mothers continue to function despite ongoing challenges. However, the persistent nature of this stress indicates a need for systemic support rather than merely individual interventions. The stress profile reflects the broader social reality of single mothers who must navigate parenting responsibilities while simultaneously managing economic survival, suggesting that their psychological wellbeing is intimately connected to their social and economic circumstances.

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