

Impact of Gender on Single Parenting Challenges

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Abstract: *Children are supposed to grow in a family setting where both mother and father take their respective roles in the upbringing of the child. In recent years there has been a sudden rise in the phenomenon of single parent families. Single parent families face challenges in properly raising their children. This research sought to find out the impact of gender on single parenting challenges to their infant children's learning and development. The research employed mixed methodologies. It used questionnaires, observation checklist and document analysis as research instruments. The sample of research participants consisted of 30 school teachers, 18 school heads and 20 parents and 20 children in grade 1 and 2. The data is presented in the form of tables and excerpts. The study found out that most single parents who faced many problems were female. The female single parents occupied the lower ranks of the social strata. The study showed that female single parents were in most cases uneducated having failed to complete secondary education which put them at a disadvantage when competing for jobs on the labour market. The limited education meant that the female single mothers also faced challenges when it came to assisting their children with home work. The type of work they performed was physically exhausting so that at the end of the day they could not find time to assist their children with homework. The academic performance of infant children from single female parents was generally lower than those from intact families. The study recommends that the schools organise support groups for single parents. The study also recommends that the government legislation and policies should assist low income single parents in solving their parenting problems. There is need for schools to set up guidance and counselling programmes to assist children from single families so that they are able to cope with challenges they face and are able to compete with children from intact families.*

Keywords: Single parent family, ECD children, Ecological Systems Theory, Children's right and Education

1. Introduction

Single parenting presents a number of challenges to the parent who will be staying with the child. The parent who will be staying with the child has to face the challenge of feeding for the child, making sure the child develops as a whole and playing own role and that of the missing parent. Studies of Craig (2005) and Kail (2002) reveal that in the single parent families the absence of the other parent figure results in failure to provide a basis for positive attachment between the absent parent and the child thereby affecting the child's psychosocial aspect of learning and development. The impact of the effect to the child of the absent parent differs where the absent parent is female and where the absent parent is male. Kail (2002) found out that single mothers have more parenting problems than single fathers. On the other hand Lloyd and Blance (1996) who studied parenting family styles in sub-Saharan countries of Africa, found out that female headed single parent households tended to have better educational opportunity and attainment than male headed single parent households. It is the intention of this study to find out if there is really a difference on the impact on learning and development between children raised by the male and female genders of single parents.

2. Research Question

Which gender in single parenting faces more parenting problems?

3. Literature Review

It is when the family bond between parents is broken that a family becomes a single parent family. Sibanda, Chingove and Munyati (2012) describe a single family style as a family with either father or mother living with their children from their previous marriage. Tassoni (2002) in his findings on causes of single parent families in the US sites divorce

and death as some of major causes of single parent families. In recent years the phenomenon of teen pregnancies has given rise to single parent families as both parents will be immature to make a lasting family. New York Times (2004) made studies in the southern part of Africa and found out that poverty and teenage pregnancies poverty led to a rise in single parent families. These teenage pregnancies actually perpetuate the poverty cycle as the children born will likely be unable to get good education thereby predisposing them to teen pregnancies if the children born are girls. Single parenting family system can be as a result of a death, divorce or having children out of wedlock

In instances where the single parent family is as a result of teen pregnancy the young mother lacks both parenting skills and skills to generate income to feed the family. The mother will be immature. In most cases the mother is forced to leave school in order to nurse the child. Kail (2002) found that some single mothers had challenges in reading to their children. The challenges were due to their busy schedules trying to fend for the family and the fact that they dropped from school and therefore have literacy limitations.

The findings from a study in Virginia by (Kail (2002) show that some single mothers have more parenting problems than single fathers. The studies reveal that in the first few months after divorce most mothers were less affectionate towards their children due to stress from divorce. The single mothers especially very young mothers had little experience in single parenting skills. Most single mothers often had difficulty in choosing between helping one child do their home work or going to the market to fend for the needed family supplies or doing the family laundry. The findings indicate that most young single mothers were less able to parent effectively thus had little time to read to their children or supervise their home work resulting in the children having little parental assistance at home on their learning and development needs.

Craig (2005) carried out a research on single parenting family in Australia and came up with the following finding about single mother parenting families: single mothers rarely read to their children as they always have a busy day's schedule. The single mothers spend their day at work and when they come back home they are tired, too tired to do further duties leaving them with little time to supervise their children's home work or read stories to their children. Anthony, Anthony, Glanville, Naaman and Shaffer (2005) carried out a study on the relationship between single parenting stress, parental behaviour and preschooler's social competences and behaviour problems in the infant classroom. Anthony et al's (2005) studies reveal that parent's stress is reflected in children's loneliness, withdrawal, regression and fear of loss of the remaining parent. The enormous stress exposed to single mothers is due to the need to provide for the financial and material needs of family, provision of children's learning materials and playing the role of both father and mother to their children. It is now the view of this study to find out if the gender of the single parents determined the level of activity in the provision of learning and development materials such as story books, toys, blocks, puzzles and others in order to enhance their children's learning and development

Kail (2002) in his studies on single mother families of divorced families states that in the first few months after divorce mothers were less affectionate towards their children due to the stress of divorce. The studies reveal that both mother and child suffer from distress of major changes in life circumstances such as changes in living conditions for instance a family that had been living a high standard of life may end up in a low status family life. The family may be displaced from their comfortable home to a small uncomfortable home. When there is a divorce the family income is affected. In most families the father figure could be the sole breadwinner. The single mother has to make numerous life adjustments in order to adapt to the changed life situation. Single mothers become less able to parent their children effectively. Fathers too were not quite able to control their children alone without the mother figure whose role may be difficult to replace.

Borgers (1996) carried out studies in the Netherlands on single parent families and found out that there were better education outcomes of children from single father families than single mother families. This was because in most families the father figure will be the breadwinner and the family does not suffer much financially when the mother is absent. In most cases mothers usually have more time with their children than fathers which makes the children gain more social and emotional skills when they have a mother figure present than when they have father figure present. On the other hand Ainsworth, Dornell and Dater (2000) found out that children from single mother families and single father families do not show any significant difference in their education outcomes. Though they all performed worse than children from intact families.

Barajas' (2011) on single parent families in the US found out that single parent families have tripled in the past five decades and majority being single mother families. Barajas (2011) states that of the 55% of children living with single

parents only 17% lived with single fathers. Barajas (2011) noted that children in father absent homes succeed less in school than those in father present homes. Lloyd and Blance (1996) who studied parenting family styles in the sub-Saharan countries of Africa, reveal that most single parent households are headed by females. The research findings further reveal that children from female headed house-holds tend to have greater education opportunity and attainment than in male headed house-holds. From the previous findings it appears most single parent families are headed by females and that most children from female headed households tend to achieve more education attainment than children from male headed households. Male single parents tend to have less time with their children leading the children to lag behind in social development. Therefore the current study sought to compare the education provision and performance of grade 1 and 2 children from single mothers and fathers in Glen-view/Mufakose in area in Harare.

4. Methodology

The research adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Belensky (2010) a descriptive research design obtains information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to design what exists in respect to variables or conditions in a situation. Sage (2010) views that descriptive research designs help provide answers to questions who, what, when, where and how with a particular research problem. In the current study the descriptive research design was suitable since it sought to establish the teachers' views and perceptions towards the impact of single parenting challenges towards the learning and development of their infant children. It focused on problems likely to be faced by children from single parent families and the impact of the problems in the children's class performance and attendance during the early childhood stage of grade1 and 2.

In the study of human relationships such as parenting techniques or family issues the experimental designs are less suitable as they require strict control of variables which is only suitable in natural sciences thus the descriptive survey is most suitable in the current study. It was the researcher's intention to probe into the effect of gender of the parent living with the child affected the challenges faced by single parents and how they affected their children's education and also how the children can be helped to attain high education achievement despite coming from single parenting families.

Ideally the research strove to investigate the effect of the gender of the parent who stayed with the child and the problems faced by children from single parent families during the early childhood education which is the foundation for their future learning. One advantage of this design is that the respondents are the people who are directly in contact with the particular children from single parent homes. They witness the problems faced by the children in the real classroom environment thus making the collected information valid. Sage (2003) noted that descriptive studies can yield rich data that leads to important recommendations. This research design becomes suitable since findings can be generalised to the whole population.

The researcher conducted a random sampling procedure to pick six schools from the many schools in Glenview/Mufakose District of Harare. Fordon (2001) states that random sampling involves the selecting of a sample on which each element of the population has an equal chance of being selected. The research participants comprised of teachers, deputy heads, heads, teachers in charge, infant teachers and parents so a stratified sample was made. A stratified sample is a probability sampling technique in which the researcher divides the entire population into different subgroups or strata and then randomly selects the final subjects (Farlon, 2003). This type of sampling was used because the researcher wanted to find the perceptions of the subgroups within the population. The researcher adopted this procedure for the purpose of obtaining the

possible richest information required to answer the research question.

The instruments used in the research were questionnaires, interviews, observation checklist and document analysis. It was important to use the instruments for purposes of triangulation. The information got from questionnaires needed to be verified using observation checklist and document analysis. Interviews gave the researcher opportunity further probe information that was not quite clear.

5. Results

Table 1: Demographic Data For All Participants. (N=68)

Variable	Descriptor	Frequency		Percentage
Teachers	Age range	21-30 years	2	7%
		31-40 years	9	30%
		41-50 years	12	40%
		Over 50 years	7	23%
		Total	30	100%
	Gender	Female	28	98%
		Male	2	7%
		Total	30	100%
	Professional Qualification	Certificate in Education	5	17%
		Diploma in Education	16	53%
		Degree	9	30%
		Total	30	100%
	Teaching Experience	0-10 years	9	30%
		11-20 years	15	50%
		Over 20 years	6	6%
		Total	30	100%
Variable	Descriptor	Frequency		Percentage
Heads Deputy Heads Teachers In Charge	Professional Qualifications	Diploma in Education	2	11%
		Degree	16	89%
		Total	18	100%
Parents	Age Range	21-30	12	60%
		31-40	5	25%
		Over 40	3	15%
		Total	20	100%
	Gender	Female	16	80%
		Male	4	20%
		Total	20	100%
	Professional Qualifications	No Qualification	14	70%
		Certificated	4	20%
		Degree	2	10%

There were more female teacher respondents than male teacher respondents. There were more teachers who had diploma in education than other professional qualifications. The table also reveals that a high number of teachers had above 11 to 20 years teaching experience.

Most school authority office bearers who responded in the research study were well educated mature professional with a lot of teaching experience as indicated by the data provided. Most of the school authorities had an age range of over 50 years comprising 89% of the respondents. Most of the school authority office bearers who responded were degree holding females whose teaching experience was above 20 years. The gender percentage of females who responded is 78% and those with degree professional qualification comprised of 89% of the respondents.

Of the single parents interviewed, 60% of them were in the range of 21-30yrs being the majority of the respondents. The single mothers comprised of 80% of the gender of single parents. 70% of the respondents had education qualification of below 3 O' Level passes. Most of the single parents who participated in the research study were unemployed.

Table 2: Gender comparison in problems of single parenting

Variable	Descriptor		Frequency
Which single parent gender do most children come from?	Female	26	87%
	Male	4	13%
	Total	30	100%
Which gender of single parents has more parenting problems?	Male	3	10%
	Female	27	90%
	Total	30	100%
Which gender is mostly well	Female	4	13%

educated and employed?	Male	26	87%
	Total	30	100%

From the questionnaire responses, 87% of respondents pointed out that in the target area there are more single mothers than single fathers. 90% of the respondents revealed that single mothers had more parenting challenges than single fathers.

6. Interview Responses on the Impact of Gender On Single Parenting Problems

Of the interview responses made by single parents it was pointed out most children from single parent homes were from single mother homes. Interviewees revealed that single mothers face more parenting problems than single mothers. The following illustrations depicted the views above:

Excerpt 1

“Due to teenage pregnancies, many teenage girls are impregnated and left to look after the children alone, hence they face more parenting challenges than the teenage fathers” (Respondent 4).

Excerpt 2

“Most single mothers in my area are unemployed thus they face more parenting challenges than employed single father. The single mothers face an additional burden of illiteracy as they did not complete their education .” (Respondent 3).

Excerpt 3

“Some widows who are not employed often face more single parenting challenges than widowers. The widowers in most cases were the breadwinners so they do not suffer much economically when their spouses die ” (Respondent 2).

Excerpt 4

“Most single fathers remarry after death of spouse or divorce while most single mothers remain unmarried, it is then the single mothers who face more single parenting challenges than single fathers” (Respondent 1).

Excerpt 5

“When a girl becomes pregnant she is forced to leave school. This limits the level of education the girl child is able to get.”

Female single parents faced more challenges like having to leave school when they became pregnant. The burden of having to leave school implies that the single mother has limited educational background which predisposes the female single parent to lower paying jobs in the labour market. They also face the challenge of having limited literacy which makes them face challenges when assisting their children with homework. In the case of widows the death of a spouse will in most cases imply reduced income as in most instances the male figure will be the breadwinner.

7. Discussion

The findings made in the current study on parenting problems faced by single mothers and single fathers it was

revealed that single mothers faced more parenting problems than single fathers. The study found that in the target area the young mothers were inexperienced and had attained little education to warrant them well paying jobs thus they failed to adequately provide for their family needs single handed. The single mothers were dropouts from school who had literacy limitations. This meant they were not able to properly supervise their children’s homework due to their educational handicap. These findings concur with those of Kail (2002) who also found that single parent females had more challenges in reading to their children than did single parent males. Most females had become parents when they were in their teens implying they were too young, immature and inexperienced to become parents. This predisposed them to face more parenting challenges.

Other single mothers were widows who had depended on their husbands for family income thus when left alone could not find decent jobs to fend for their children. The jobs they got were mostly menial which made them tired so as to be unable to assist their children with homework if they had literacy capacity to do so. Most single fathers were said to quickly re-marry after divorce or death of spouse thereby relieving themselves of single parenting problems. Hence the single mothers had more parenting problems than single fathers in the target group.

The results of the study were in agreement with those of Borgers (1996) in Netherlands who found out that there were better education outcomes from children from single father families than single mother families. This research’s findings differ from those done by Blance (1996) who found that children from female headed single parent families in sub-Saharan Africa had greater educational opportunity and attainment than male headed single families. This could be attributed to failure by female single parents to adequately fend for their families especially these days when the country is facing economic challenges. These make it very difficult for female single parents to find gainful employment where they can adequately provide for their children. In addition single female parents were school dropouts who had no skills to offer on the job market so could not earn much should they get employment.

The study found out that single female parents faced more challenges due to the stress they endured as divorcees or widows. This was contrary to their male counterparts who quickly remarried after being widowed or divorced. These findings agree with those of Kail (2002) who found that a few months after a divorce female single parent were less affectionate to their children due to the stress of divorce. Their response to the problems of divorce makes it very hard to give the expected moral, social, psychological and emotional support to their children.

The current finding concurred with the previous research study of Craig (2005) who posits that in his research study. Single mothers faced more parenting challenges in the provision of their children’s educational needs care and support. However Craig (2005) pointed out that in his studies despite single mothers facing more parenting problems than single fathers they were more affectionate and showed more consideration to their children than did single

fathers. The current research data findings concluded that single mothers of most grade1 and 2 children in Glenview-Mufakose district faced more single parenting challenges in the provision of their children's educational needs than did single fathers in the target area.

8. Conclusion

The research study made the following conclusions:

- Single mothers faced more challenges in the provision of their children's educational needs than did single fathers.
- Most single mothers were inexperienced in terms of finding ways of providing for their children.
- Single mothers had limited education which put them at a disadvantage in terms of finding ways to provide for their children.
- Most single mothers performed work that was physically exhausting such that at the end of the day they were so tired that they could not assist their children with home work or read story books to their children.

9. Recommendations

The research study makes the following recommendations:

- There is need for single mothers to be supported in forming support groups that would be involved in income generating projects. The mothers would then use the proceeds to fund the education of their children.
- Since most mothers have limited education schools are urged to establish adult literacy schools.
- Most single mothers dropped from school after being pregnant. There is need for a shift in policy to allow the mothers to complete school after delivery.
- There is need to counsel the single mothers on the need to find time with their children offering them affection.
- There is need for authorities to offer support to single mothers by way of helping pay fees and support their children.

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