
Single Mothers and Their Parenting Struggles in Karachi, Pakistan - A Sociocultural and Economic Perspective

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Abstract

Single motherhood is an emerging yet underexplored social reality in urban Pakistan, where traditional family structures continue to dominate societal norms. In cities like Karachi, the increasing prevalence of single mothers, whether due to divorce, widowhood, or abandonment—has brought new challenges to light, particularly in the realm of parenting. Despite its growing occurrence, single motherhood remains heavily stigmatized, often associated with social exclusion, economic insecurity, and emotional hardship. This study aims to investigate the parenting struggles of single mothers residing in Karachi, a city characterized by its diverse socioeconomic landscape and complex cultural fabric. The research focuses on how these women navigate the dual responsibilities of caregiving and breadwinning, amidst cultural expectations, financial pressures, and limited institutional support systems. Employing a mixed-method research design, this study combines in-depth qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to capture the nuanced experiences of single mothers. Key areas of exploration include access to education and healthcare for children, social stigma, mental health, and coping strategies. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and psychological dimensions of single motherhood in Pakistan and to provide evidence-based insights for developing inclusive policies and community-based interventions that can better support single-parent households in urban settings.

Keywords: Single mothers; parenting struggles; Karachi; urban Pakistan; gender roles; child-rearing; social stigma; family systems; maternal well-being; economic hardship

Introduction

In the rapidly urbanizing context of Pakistan, traditional family structures are evolving, yet cultural perceptions about gender roles and parenting remain deeply rooted in patriarchal norms. Single motherhood—whether due to widowhood, divorce, separation, or abandonment—is increasingly becoming a visible social reality. However, despite its growing prevalence, single motherhood continues to be among the most stigmatized and under-researched aspects of family life in Pakistan. This is especially true in urban centers like Karachi, where a wide spectrum of socioeconomic classes intersects with rigid cultural values, creating a unique yet challenging environment for single mothers.

Karachi, being Pakistan's largest and most diverse metropolis, presents a complex social landscape. It is home to millions of families from various ethnic and economic backgrounds. While

urbanization has led to greater female participation in the workforce and changing attitudes towards marriage and divorce, these changes have not necessarily translated into broader societal acceptance of single mothers. In fact, the breakdown of a marital relationship or the absence of a male breadwinner often leads to a marked decline in a woman's social status, compounded by legal ambiguities, lack of support systems, and economic vulnerability (Ali & Bibi, 2022; Jafri, 2020). Single mothers in Karachi face multifaceted parenting challenges that go beyond the scope of financial hardship. These include social stigma, psychological strain, and the lack of institutional and community support. Without adequate child care, mental health resources, or legal protection, many single mothers are forced to rely on informal networks that may not always be supportive or even accessible. Societal expectations continue to prioritize male-led households, and women who step outside these norms—especially by raising children alone—are often seen as deviant or morally suspect (Shirkat Gah, 2018; Qureshi & Shaikh, 2019). This social ostracization affects not only the mothers but also their children, who may face bullying, discrimination, or reduced opportunities in education and social settings.

Furthermore, studies from similar patriarchal contexts suggest that single mothers are more susceptible to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety due to compounded stress and isolation (Cairney et al., 2003; Khan & Rizvi, 2019). These emotional burdens, when left unaddressed, may impact parenting effectiveness and child development. Yet, despite these pressing concerns, single mothers in Pakistan remain largely invisible in both academic discourse and policy frameworks. Government and non-governmental programs rarely account for the specific needs of single-parent households, particularly those headed by women.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of single mothers in Karachi. By using a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, the research aims to understand the interplay of economic, social, and psychological factors that influence single motherhood in an urban Pakistani context. The findings will not only contribute to the academic literature on gender and family but also offer actionable insights for policymakers, social workers, and advocacy groups working to support women and children in vulnerable family structures.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the primary parenting challenges faced by single mothers in Karachi.
2. To examine the socio-economic and cultural factors contributing to the struggles of single mothers in urban Pakistan.
3. To evaluate the impact of these parenting struggles on the psychological well-being of both mothers and their children.

Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Single mothers in Karachi experience significantly higher levels of parenting stress compared to mothers in dual-parent households.
2. **H2:** Social stigma and economic hardship are positively correlated with adverse psychological outcomes among single mothers in Karachi.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of single motherhood has received considerable attention in global academic discourse, particularly in Western contexts where the number of single-parent households has steadily increased over the past few decades (Harkness, 2016; Amato, 2005). In contrast, the discourse around single motherhood in South Asia—and particularly in Pakistan—remains

limited, stigmatized, and often hidden beneath broader conversations on family breakdown, divorce, and women's empowerment (Shirkat Gah, 2018). In Pakistani society, where traditional patriarchal norms continue to define gender roles and family structures, single mothers are often viewed through a lens of moral scrutiny and social deviance, rather than as individuals navigating structural and emotional adversity (Ali & Bibi, 2022).

In Karachi, a sprawling and economically diverse metropolis, single mothers face unique challenges at the intersection of social stigma, economic hardship, and institutional neglect. The societal framework tends to idealize joint and nuclear families led by a male figure, and women raising children independently due to divorce, widowhood, or abandonment—are often perceived as social outliers. This perception not only affects how society treats single mothers but also influences their access to resources such as employment, education, child healthcare, and legal aid (Jafri, 2020; Qureshi & Shaikh, 2019).

From an economic perspective, single mothers in Pakistan often find themselves in a precarious position. With limited inheritance rights, wage inequality, and fewer opportunities for dignified employment, these women are at increased risk of falling into poverty (Ahmad, 2021; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009). The absence of a co-parent or familial financial support system places the entire burden of household expenditure and child-rearing on their shoulders. A study by Khan and Rizvi (2019) indicates that economic instability is the primary driver of chronic stress and burnout among single mothers in low-income urban communities.

International studies suggest that children of single mothers are more likely to experience developmental delays, academic underperformance, and behavioral challenges—not solely because of the absence of a father figure but due to the compounded effects of economic deprivation, psychological distress, and lack of consistent caregiving (Harkness, 2016; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In the Pakistani context, where quality education and healthcare are already scarce for the lower-middle class, single mothers often face an uphill battle in ensuring their children's well-being.

In addition to financial challenges, psychological and emotional stress is another critical domain that affects single mothers. Parenting under constant scrutiny, managing societal shame, and juggling multiple roles—caregiver, breadwinner, protector—often results in high levels of anxiety and depression (Cairney et al., 2003). Mental health, while a global concern, is still heavily stigmatized in Pakistan, with minimal access to psychological services. This results in emotional suppression and social withdrawal among single mothers, further isolating them from community networks that might otherwise offer support (Rizvi & Ejaz, 2018).

Social exclusion is not only an emotional experience but also a material one. Single mothers in Pakistan often report being denied rental housing, employment opportunities, and even access to religious or community spaces due to their marital status (Shirkat Gah, 2018; Ali & Bibi, 2022). This exclusion reduces their agency and reinforces the cycle of dependency and marginalization. Many resort to informal labor or home-based work, which, while flexible, rarely offers economic sustainability or social mobility.

Despite these challenges, research also points to resilience and agency among single mothers. Many women develop coping strategies such as forming peer support networks, engaging in informal income generation, or seeking vocational training to improve their employability (Jafri, 2020; World Bank, 2022). However, these efforts are often constrained by broader systemic barriers, such as the absence of state support for childcare, lack of legal literacy, and patriarchal community structures.

What is glaringly absent in the existing literature is an empirical, context-specific analysis of how these struggles manifest in daily life—particularly in cities like Karachi. While qualitative studies have documented personal narratives, there is a pressing need for data-driven, quantitative research

that can provide generalizable insights to inform policy. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the economic, emotional, and social parenting challenges faced by single mothers in Karachi through a structured survey approach.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the parenting struggles of single mothers in Karachi. A structured questionnaire was developed to gather data on socio-economic conditions, parenting stress levels, access to resources, and perceived social support.

Population and Sample

The target population comprises single mothers residing in Karachi, who are either divorced, widowed, or separated and are the sole caregivers for at least one child. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the inclusion of diverse respondents across various socio-economic backgrounds.

Sample Size

The sample size was limited to 100 single mothers, representing multiple localities including both middle-income and low-income neighborhoods.

Sampling Technique

Given the sensitive nature of the study and the challenges involved in identifying and reaching single mothers, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed. This method allowed the researcher to deliberately select individuals who fit specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives.

Inclusion Criteria

- Women residing in Karachi.
- Must be single mothers (i.e., widowed, divorced, legally separated, or abandoned by spouse).
- Must have at least one dependent child under the age of 18.
- Must be primary caregivers of their children.
- Willing and able to provide informed consent.

Data Collection

Participants were approached through local NGOs, community centers, vocational training institutes, and informal networks working with women in urban communities. These partner organizations helped identify potential participants, ensuring representation from both low-income and middle-income households.

The questionnaire was divided into sections covering:

- Demographic Information (age, education, employment, number of children, marital status)
- Economic Status (monthly income, employment type, housing situation)
- Parenting Stress (measured using an adapted version of the Parenting Stress Index)
- Social Support (extent of support from family, community, institutions)
- Mental Well-being (self-reported levels of stress, anxiety, and access to coping resources)

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were used to present demographic patterns and frequency distributions.

Inferential statistics, including correlation analysis and independent sample t-tests, were employed to test the hypotheses.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was taken from all participants before data collection.
- Identities were kept anonymous, and data was securely stored.
- Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage.
- Emotional support resources were shared for participants' well-being.

Results & Discussion

A total of 100 single mothers were interviewed for the study, representing a cross-section of socio-economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds found within Karachi. Below table is summarizing collected data.

Table: 1

Variable	Measure/Category	Value (Raw Data)	Count (N=100)
Demographic Information	Age Group	25-40 years	65
	Age Group	Other (Under 25/Over 40)	35
	Children Age Range	5-15 years	70
	Children Age Range	Other (Under 5/Over 15)	30
	Education Level	Secondary Education	50
	Education Level	Vocational Training	30
	Education Level	Higher Education	20
Economic Challenges	Monthly Income	Below PKR 20,000	60
	Monthly Income	PKR 20,000 - 40,000	30
	Monthly Income	Above PKR 40,000	10
	Employment Status	Unemployed/Informal Labor	40
	Employment Status	Formal Employment	60
	Housing Situation	Rented or Shared Housing	50
	Housing Situation	Owned Housing	50
Parenting Stress	Parenting Stress Index (PSI-SF Score)	Average Score > 70	72
	Source of Parenting Stress	Financial Strain	64
	Source of Parenting Stress	Emotional Stress, Other Factors	36
Social Support	Perceived Social Support	Adequate Support (Family/Friends)	30
	Perceived Social Support	Lack of Support	70
Mental Health & Well-being	Level of Stress (Self-Reported)	Stress Level > 4/5	50
	Level of Anxiety (Self-Reported)	Anxiety Level > 3.8/5	50
	Clinical Depression Symptoms	Showed Symptoms	50

Coping Strategies	Coping Strategy Type	Problem-focused Coping	58
	Coping Strategy Type	Emotion-focused Coping	34
	Coping Strategy Type	Other (Avoidance, etc.)	8

Key Analysis & Findings

Table: 2

Category	Key Findings	Percentage (%)
Demographics	Mothers aged 25-40 years	65%
	Mothers with children aged 5-15 years	70%
	Mothers with secondary education or vocational training	50%
Economic Challenges	Mothers earning below PKR 20,000/month	60%
	Unemployed or engaged in informal labor	40%
	Experiencing housing instability (rent/shared living)	50%
Parenting Stress	Average Parenting Stress Index (PSI-SF) score > 70	72%
Social Support	Financial strain as the primary source of stress	64%
	Adequate social support (family, friends, community)	30%
	Lack of institutional support/access to community programs	70%
Mental Health & Well-Being	High levels of stress (score > 4/5)	50%
	High levels of anxiety (score > 3.8/5)	50%
	Symptoms of clinical depression	50%
Coping Strategies	Use of problem-focused coping strategies	58%
	Use of emotion-focused coping strategies	34%

Hypothesis Validation

Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Hypothesis	Test Used	Result	Conclusion
H1: Single mothers in Karachi experience significantly higher levels of parenting stress compared to normative stress benchmarks.	t-test	$t = 5.62, p < 0.05$	Supported: Single mothers show significantly higher stress than average.
H2: Economic hardship and lack of social support are significantly correlated with increased psychological stress among single mothers.	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.72$ (economic hardship) & $r = 0.58$ (social support), $p < 0.05$	Supported: Strong positive correlation between financial strain and stress.

Recommendations

Policy Interventions

- Government support programs for single mothers should be expanded, including financial assistance, subsidized childcare, and access to affordable housing.

- Social security policies targeting single-parent households should be a priority to reduce economic stress and increase self-sufficiency.

Institutional Support

- Community organizations and NGOs should be more actively involved in providing emotional and social support to single mothers. This can include setting up dedicated counseling services, social support groups, and skill development programs to enhance employability.

Mental Health Programs

- Increase mental health awareness and counseling services tailored to single mothers, addressing both emotional well-being and parenting stress.
- Workshops and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma around mental health, particularly for marginalized women, should be promoted.

Educational and Vocational Support

- Vocational training programs for single mothers could significantly enhance their chances of securing stable employment, reducing economic stress.
- Educational scholarships or skills development programs should be made more accessible for low-income, single mothers.

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