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## The well-being of children in a single-mother headed family: a case of Debre Tabor, Ethiopia

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### ABSTRACT

Although the family structure has been a crucial factor to Ethiopian children's well-being at all stages of their lives, previous research has not looked into the negative effects of the state of single motherhood on their children's well-being because the way the community responds to children of single mothers varies in different cultures. Therefore, the main objective of the study was to explore the well-being of children's growth in single mothers in different social contexts in the city of Debre Tabor, Ethiopia. A qualitative method with a descriptive multiple case study design was employed to examine children's wellbeing in single-mother-headed households. Eleven in-depth interviews with single mothers' children were conducted. To collect data, six key informant interviews with single mothers and teachers were done in Amharic (the participants' first language), as were three focus group talks with single mothers. The data were transcribed, translated, and thematically examined. Single mothers' informal economic survival was identified as a source of discomfort for children, and some community rites were classified as a source of neglect for their children, according to the study. Furthermore, children's concerns differ depending on the sort of single mother, and single mothers' diverse life challenges have a variety of effects on many aspects of their children's well-being. As a result, stakeholders should acknowledge single mothers and their children as a multifaceted, identifiable vulnerable group in the community, and implicit policy actions to improve the well-being of single mothers' children should be implemented.

**KEY TERMS:** single mother, children of single mothers, child well-being, family structure, Debre Tabor City, Ethiopia

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## INTRODUCTION

The study investigated the well-being of children being raised by single mothers in Debre Tabor City, Ethiopia. Its objective was to explore domains of well-being for children growing up with their mother being the only parent. To achieve the research study outcomes, an exploration of the state of single motherhood and the community's perception of single motherhood and their children was vital. Children's well-being concerns in their families, communities and as well as resiliency tactics in the face of adversity are also discussed. Furthermore, the study situates the well-being of children in the context of a single mother's economic survival strategies and available community support. In terms of the study methodology, the qualitative approach was relied on, adopting a cross-sectional multiple case study design with basic data collection, management, and analysis procedures. The article begins with a background section, then outlines the methodology, followed by a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and implications.

## BACKGROUND

In Ethiopia, the number of single parents has risen over time. According to recent research by the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency (CSA) and Inter City Fund (ICF) International (2012), more than one in every four families is headed by a woman. If we see the percent distribution of living arrangements among children, in Ethiopia, 71 percent of children under the age of 15 live with both parents, 14 percent with just their mother, 4% with just their father, and 10% with neither parent (Central Statistical Authority/Ethiopia and ORC Macro, 2001). According to a recent review paper, the family structure may influence child wellbeing through a variety of paths like parental resources, parental mental health, parental relationship quality, and father involvement (Waldfoegel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010, p. 87). This is especially true in Ethiopia and most African countries, where males are the breadwinners as a result, children raised by single mothers confront directly with economic and other challenges. Children from single-mother families have poorer outcomes in general (Harkness, Gregg, & Fernández-Salgado, 2020). Various scholars agree that children's well-being is dependent on the family structure, the physical environment in which they live, and patterns of interaction with their parents (see e.g. Bzostek & Berger, 2017). For instance, children in single-mother families are at increased risk of experiencing poor emotional health (Dinisman, Andresen, Montserrat, Strózik, & Strózik, 2017). These authors also emphasize the importance of family relationships in the development of children's well-being. Their conclusion highlighted those children living in separated families tend to be less satisfied with whom they live with and their family life. However, depending on the parenting roles, culture, and customs of society, the state of single-motherhood and its impact on the well-being of children vary from society to society.

The most difficult problem faced by single parents in both developing and developed countries is the attitudes and behaviour of society (Lee, 2011). Similarly, these negative attitudes towards single motherhood apply to most African countries. A very recent community perception study on single parenting in Zaria, Northern Nigeria described it as either "very bad" or "bad" and thus "it is abnormal," and believed to have effects both on the children and their parents, and the society at large (Anyebe, Lawal, Dodo, & Adeniyi, 2017, p. 7).

Consider the fact that divorced or broken families are sometimes considered deviants and a threat to the social order of African countries. For example, the attitudes towards divorcees and non-married Christian single mothers in Nairobi are the least tolerated in the community (Kahindi, 2018). Similarly, single mothers in Ethiopia face socioeconomic, emotional, and other psychological challenges in their future lives; the absence of a spouse is difficult, causing a lack of self-confidence; they also face the burden of responsibilities while raising children, childcare, and the difficulty of answering identity-related questions from children (Zufan, 2021). In particular, divorce in Ethiopia has been noted to result in financial, social, and psychological problems for women (Abebe, 2015). Following a divorce from their husband or partner, single mothers in Ethiopia depend on the informal sectors where they earn low incomes, in which the main breadwinners of the family are men (Serkalem, 2006).

The above-mentioned studies also implied that children are forced to leave school, and work in informal jobs to complement their mothers' precarious livelihood strategies. Children raised in single-parent homes (either by a single mother or a single father) generally have poor academic achievement, self-regulation problems, and have emotional, psychological, and health problems in school and at home settings (Coleman & Ganong, 2014).

How and how unique single motherhood affects the wellbeing of children could be examined in context. Moreover, the rationale for conducting the study was motivated by researchers' observations in Debre Tabor Town, where they observe negative community perceptions of single mother-headed families and their children. The negative attitude is expressed by insults through using local language (Amharic) phrases: *Ye set lije* (የሴት ልጅ) and *Set woldo set yasadegeew* (ሴት ወለዶ ሴት ያሳደገው) (a derogatory term used to describe poor behavior by a child (behaved). The complexities of discrimination and the well-being of children raised by single mothers vary from time to time across different settings, and to the knowledge of the researchers, no empirical study of this phenomenon has been conducted in Debre Tabor City, Ethiopia.

Therefore, the goal of the study was to investigate the well-being concerns of children who live with single mothers and identify how the state of single motherhood negatively affects children's well-being in Debre Tabor city, Ethiopia.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study method was adopted to gain a proper and thorough understanding of the well-being of the sampled children (children raised by single mothers) whose age range was 13 to 18. Because the study's purpose was to look into children's well-being concerns from their perspective, qualitative research is preferred for eliciting their viewpoints. The qualitative study helps to bring out detailed aspects of a study from various dimensions in Ethiopia (Endaweke, 2017). Participants' selection was achieved through purposive sampling techniques guided by ethical requirements and procedures. This sampling technique is appropriate when the participants are acceptable and known to be relevant to the topic (Tolossa, 2015). Due to that, single mothers were selected as key informants because they were considered to have ample experience of the feelings of their children in daily interactions, and it is believed in Ethiopian culture that children mostly report their feelings to their mothers rather than other members of the family. Teachers, meanwhile, are trusted by students, and as a result, they have witnessed daily behavioural changes in children, as well as their interactions with peers and academic changes at school. Data collection fieldwork was conducted between January-June 2018. It encompassed in-depth interviews with children, key informant interviews with teachers and single mothers, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with single mothers. A focus group discussion guide was prepared for FGD and semi-structured interview guidelines were prepared for all other data collection methods. All the data collection instruments: -Audio recordings, as well as sign language data (written by memos), were transcribed, translated, coded, and thematized. Moreover, the researchers identified themes, cross-checked with the original data, and discussed the data as per the notes and memos that they have during interviews.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The ethical condition of this study was approved by the Post-Graduate Degrees Committee of the Department of Sociology in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Gondar. In addition, the instruments of data collection and highlights of the study have been presented and approved by the department adviser before data collection. Parental consent was required for all child participants. Accordingly, the in-depth interview was conducted on a home-to-home basis, since their parental consent was necessary. Moreover, the objectives and significance of the research were discussed both with key informants and FGD participants. In parallel with that, convenient time and space were based on participants' interests. In this respect, the participants were given clarified informed consent and signed before being interviewed.

## FINDINGS

### Demographic profile

In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven children (four females and seven males) between the ages of 13 and 18 years living with their single mothers. Among the child participants was a child who lost her father and lived with her single mother and siblings. Other participants lived with their single mothers and were not aware of their biological fathers. All single mothers of the eleven child participants were not formally employed. Of the six key informants, two were divorced single mothers, one was a widowed single mother and the last three were teachers. All the three single mothers (the children who took part in the in-depth interview did not all come from the three single mothers) came from different single mother family types (divorced, widowed, and never married) and had an experience of raising children without fathers; and three homeroom teachers who taught students of different backgrounds for more than 10 years at school and were familiar with single mother children's cases at school.

### Single mothers' livelihood strategies and child well being

The study established that children of single mothers had worries about how their parents relied on the informal sector for survival. Depending on the socioeconomic status, it was noted that most single mothers worked in retail, artisanal mining, and casual labour. Such livelihoods are precarious and do not guarantee child safeguarding from time to time.

During in-depth interviews and FGDs, some children reported that their mothers engaged in brewing and selling local drinks like *Tella* (ጠላ) and *Arkie* (አረቂ), washing clothes, and baking *Injera* (እንጅራ). The children revealed their anxieties about how their mothers are exposed to sexual harassment and forced labor when they

carry out their livelihoods. Moreover, children shared how their friends from supposedly stable families had now been shunning them due to their mothers' livelihoods and also how home study after school occasionally became difficult due to distractions by customers seeking their mothers' services. The study at home was now difficult due to disturbances from customers.

During an FGD, Mrs. Melekitu (Pseudo Name) (PN), a widowed mother with three children described her family's condition as follows:

*I should be working a lot, but I'm currently selling Tella (Ethiopian homebrew) and Arki (a traditional fermented beverage). No one was present when I gave birth a few years ago to help me and arrange things to sustain my source of income, Tella, which requires a lot of work energy to generate (roasting grain, fetching water, mailing....). However, I should have fed my other children in the same manner; I left my newborn baby at home and went to work. I frequently leave my daughter for long periods when she requires my attention, care, breastfeeding, and the development of a strong mother-child bond. As a result, my son has experimented with drinking customer leftovers.*

### **Failure to participate in significant community ceremonies**

Single mothers reported that they struggle to fulfill their children's basic needs from time to time. Children interviewed also showed an insight into the sacrifices that their mothers have made for them. However, children acknowledged various challenges and discomfort that they contend with due to the lack of a father figure. They reported being negatively stereotyped by their friends and that they could not participate in cultural activities that required a male figure to take the lead role. Some children, for example, reported being unhappy during the Meskel Holiday (መስቀል ደመረ).

In Ethiopian society, men traditionally prepare *Meskel* ceremonies, while children accompany their fathers to social gatherings on the eve of the *Meskel*. Children expressed regret at failing to partake in this culturally significant activity which some children can comfortably take part in due to having their fathers in their lives. Furthermore, the Epiphany *Timket* (ጥምቀት) celebration involves children being dressed in new clothes every year, and as a result, children report feeling inferior and unhappy, as single mother children are unable to afford their children's holy day expenses. Some divorced single mothers explained how due to their financial difficulties they ended up being insensitive to their children's material needs on such significant cultural and religious observances. One mother shared that when her child requested new clothes when she could not simply afford such an expense, she would respond, "Let your father fulfill"

### **Analysis of child wellbeing needs by mother's status (divorced, never married, and widowed)**

Children's reflections varied regarding their lack of connection with fathers, presence of fathers, relations of their parents, and related social status of their parents. One child who had no father due to death had different feelings, difficulties, and life perspectives than a child who never knew his/her father or a child growing up in a divorced single mother's family, etc. The most common theme in the study findings was that whatever the causes, the absence of fathers disturbed children's happiness, social esteem, health access, and educational opportunities. In an in-depth interview, Fasika (PN), a 16-year-old female child who lived with her single mother explained her views about her wellbeing:

*When I was 4 years old, my father died because of asthma; locally called Aseme (አስፕራ). My mother also suffers from the same disease. When she experiences pain or illness, I am usually stressed and have a headache, as I fear suddenly losing her too.*

Maritu (PN), another child who did not have any siblings and grew up with a never-married single mother provided the following perspective:

*I am being raised by an unmarried single mother and now I am a grade eight student. I have never seen or known my biological father. I do not even know where he lives and where he comes from. For this reason, I always harassed my mother about meeting my father, but nothing happened. For this reason, I feel discomfort, stress, and the wish to meet him, hug and kiss him, and introduce him to my friends just to confirm that I have a father.*

### **Single mothers' life struggle and child wellbeing**

The impact of single mother-headed families on children's wellbeing is reflected through different dimensions. In FGDs, single mothers reflected feelings of difficulty towards the overall meeting of children's well-being. They

insisted that raising children as a single parent is a very challenging task that demands full time, engagement of both parents, and constantly monitoring them because of fast-changing global influences.

*Rearing children must be a full-time job for both parents. How can a single mother possibly ensure her children's well-being by herself? It is very difficult and not good at all for the well-being of children and single mothers as well. Raising children alone is challenging, especially in this context, when there is high inflation and low job opportunities. Raising children is tough for single mothers; the price of goods, food, and everything is going up.*

In the FGD, mothers also expressed that rearing a child for single mothers is more difficult because all the responsibility overloads on a single mother, and these single mothers always struggle to meet their own and dependent children's needs alone. They discussed the relevant point that single mothers always have a stressful life. They are concerned about what they will be able to give their children when they ask them to purchase clothes, shoes, uniforms, school fees, and school contributions. It is understood that raising children alone is difficult and full of strain and their children's well-being became significantly endangered if the breadwinner was men only.

### **Coping strategies for children and their single mothers**

During the interviews, children shared that extended family members were the most immediate source of support. The relations of a single mother, siblings, grandparents and other relatives are mentioned as a source of emotional and financial support. Elder siblings were noted to contribute to their younger siblings' welfare and act as role models for them. Elder sons even took part in regular monitoring and following up with their younger siblings, filling the gap of a father figure. Tilahun (PN), a child who lives with his divorced single mother explains the support of his older brother in the family.

*My brother means everything to me and to the whole family too. He graduated from Haramaya University, and now he works for a government organization. He has been assisting my mother since he started working in 2018. He takes care of all my expenses. In general, I might say that he is the only one covering something for us.*

Zeneb (PN), a 14-year-old female child living with her single mother explained the support she was getting from relatives (uncles and aunts) as:

*My aunt gives my mother and my sisters a house for free, and we live with her on a compound. She takes care of us on time when my mom gets to work. Also, most of the time, my uncle's cover our expenses at school for buying clothes and shoes. But the most important thing for me is that they are my role models, and I am thrilled with them since my mother has brothers and sisters worried too much for her.*

### **Community and Non-Governmental Organisations support**

The interviewees reported how they benefited from neighbours' support. The neighbors monitor any likely deviant behavior and are reported to supervise the children just as they would do for their children, such as praising them when they scored good points in the school. School authorities and teachers in Gafat General Elementary School, where most children from single mothers attend their school, reported needing pastoral support to ensure a sense of self-esteem for students. However, the study noted that there is no tailor-made package of support directly for children of single mothers headed households in school and other institutions. Key informants reported that support for students at school: "In collaboration with CHADIT (a local NGO working with children), the school supports single-parent children through providing school items including uniforms, exercise books, and pens" and also FGD discussants explained the support for children as:

*Teachers are role models for children. They are supported emotionally and sometimes contribute money to them, and help them develop self-esteem. Even if the assistance is not continuous, receiving a few social supports provides children with a full-fledged pleasure.*

### **Dynamics of social services for children of single mothers headed households**

Poor living standards, lack of finances to access regular medical treatment, absence of health insurance, and stress were mentioned as causes of health problems in children. The reasons for the stressful lives of single mothers and their children appeared to vary as per the types of single mothers (divorced/separate, never married, and widowed). The loss of a father is the most devastating for children, and children from divorced families are often forced to choose either their mother or father as a custodian, which aggravates their stress and health problems. Single

mothers' children usually experience frustration, trauma, headaches, anxiety, and difficult life transitions, especially when their mothers get divorced, their fathers die, or when they start school. The current condition of their single mothers is also the main source of poor emotional health for children. For example, children were worried about their mothers' health. The data collected in the interviews and FGDs revealed that most single mothers worked long hours and earned low incomes. The work, by its nature, often required frequent or long separations from their infants and young children, thereby straining the bond and attachment to their children. A single mother could not get enough time to breastfeed and form a close attachment with her infant and young children in time. They need security as well as her ability to care for the child responsively. Single-mother children who missed class had disciplinary problems and had problems with school dropouts at some grade levels. As one in-depth interview showed, single mother-raised children missed classes and decided to terminate their education to complement their mothers' livelihoods, get relief from life's hardship, to fill in their absent fathers' role. However, single mothers and school teachers' responses suggest that those challenges happened because of less involvement of single mothers with children, less parental support, or poor follow-ups. Single mothers' children explained that no platforms were being availed by helping professionals like social workers or psychologists to mitigate their plight. They were left to manage all their difficulties by themselves. They claimed that fathers would be role models for them, that they would be praised when they achieved success, and that they would listen to their interests.

## DISCUSSION

The study found that children of single mothers are dissatisfied with their mother's informal occupations. As such, their mothers had low-income, precarious, and socially unacceptable jobs in the community. This informal employment, which generates income for single mothers, exposes children and them themselves to abuse and social stigmatization in the community. Spitefulness, rape, and disrespect by community members (such as friends of a child within the neighborhood or at school, community members, customers, and employers of single mothers) are some common day-to-day experiences of children of single mother-headed families in the study area. Surprisingly, insults would strike a child depending on the type of occupation that his/her single mother performs to generate income. These aforementioned findings of various forms of abuse and social stigma experienced by single mothers and their children are comparable with findings from other studies in Africa (Newlin, 2017, p.1), which found that single mothers were considered as troublemakers who had lost their social values. Such societal discriminatory attitudes affect children's wellbeing negatively (Chant, 2007; Coleman & Ganong, 2014). Single mother children reflect that these various difficulties in Ethiopia arose as a result of their father's absence. This view is supported by (Olumatosin and Joseph, 2011; Azuka-Obieke, 2013) that single-parent children encounter various problems in their education and psychological well-being. Similarly, DeBell (2007) elaborates that having an absent father is linked to worse well-being, including poor health, poor academic achievement, negative school experiences, and decreased parental involvement in school activities.

Moreover, the current study reveals that single mothers do not have a substitute position for fathers, where cultural roles are simply played by male members of society. The concerns of the children of widowed mothers differed from those of the children of divorced mothers. What children from all single mother structures share is that the absence of fathers disrupts the happiness of children, the relationship with friends, health, education, and other social interactions of a child. Similar findings have been found in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia (Rahel, 2014); and other adverse effects on children's wellbeing in the United States too (Krueger, Jutte, Franzini, & Hayward, 2015). The study reveals the reasons given by children of single mothers for dropping out of school, including complementing their mothers' livelihoods, searching for relief from life's difficulties, substituting for the father's role, and improving their prospects. From the perspective of children, this justified why children of lone-parent families led by a single mother experience behavioural problems, but key informant and FGD findings revealed that children of single mothers missed classes because their parents were less involved and in control.

Furthermore, children of single mothers experience frustration, headaches, and stress during different social transitions in the family structure. These feelings were especially common when their mothers got divorced; their fathers died and the like. The health condition of single mothers is also the main source of stress for children. Poor economic resources, parental care, and health behaviours of single mothers aggravate the effects on children's health (Ntoims & Odimegwu, 2014). This decline in living standards increases health-related problems in children. Single mothers prefer to use traditional medicine to treat illnesses because they lack the financial resources to visit medical doctors, especially in the private health sector, where they believe better medication is available.

## IMPLICATIONS

The study identified five key dimensions through which single motherhood might affect the well-being of children negatively: Single mothers' informal economic survival as a source of unpleasant life for children, single mothers'

children being neglected and staying at home during some community ceremonies, children's concerns vary in various family structures (divorced, never married, and widowed), single mothers' life hardship is associated with several dimensions of child wellbeing, and single mothers' coping mechanisms and relatives' contributions relate to children's wellbeing. It is also important that the well-being of children growing up with their single mothers is inseparable from the multidimensional aspects of their single mothers' social, economic, and psychological aspects.

The study indicated that children of single mothers had anxiety about their single mothers' informal occupations. Engaging in these risky income-earning occupations exposes children and mothers to various kinds of abuse and neglect. At the same time, children had difficulty with time and space to study at home and were discriminated against by their friends. As a result, children of single mothers stayed at home when their mothers could not substitute the cultural roles of fathers in the community. Children of single mothers did not attend the same kinds of religious and cultural gatherings in their community (like *Meskel*).

Children of single mothers have different life experiences due to family structure. For example, a child from a divorced single mother would be disturbed by the bad relationship between his/her parents over the management of children. However, this did not work for children who lost their fathers. The variety of roles played by single mothers in the family reduced their mentoring and follow-up on their children. Children of single mothers receive emotional and financial assistance from older siblings, grandparents, and other relatives who used such practices to cope with life's challenges. However, this support was not consistent. Lack of income, near destitute life of single mothers, concerns about children's future life, illness, and absence of fatherly love aggravated poor health and psychosocial conditions of children.

## CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the problems of single mothers and their children are being overlooked. To improve their lives, special policy interventions should be designed under the national social protection policy of the country. Moreover, the study also recommends more empirical investigation of how social support from relatives, community members, and interventions by social workers employed by NGOs and government bodies can have a meaningful impact on children's wellbeing. Social workers could play a big part in designing resilient methods for empowering single mothers and their children with the right interventions. Finally, the study implies that empowering single mothers' livelihood plans through national social protection policy packages would reduce children's immediate wellbeing concerns.

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