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It's not my fault: Sociological Analysis of stigmatization of single motherhood in Benin City. Edo State.

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Abstract

Motherhood is a desire by most ladies who desire to have a family. However, the separation of couple of leave behind some level of prejudice among women mostly a a culturally inclined society. Therefore, this study seeks to sociologically examine the cause, types and implication of single motherhood as well as the social perception of women within the given situation. Max Weber theory of Social Action was adopted to explain the orientation of persons toward the behaviour of others. Being a cross-section research survey, it triangulated both qualitative and quantitative instruments (In-depth interview Guide and Questionnaire) and method of data collection for 120 respondents who are residents in selected communities in Benin metropolis. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 22.0) and thematic content analysis for the qualitative data. The findings the study revealed that: 1. Single motherhood is caused by human and natural causes. 2. Environment plays a role in the level of stigmatization. 3. The stigmatization of single mother has a ripple effect on their children. Based on this, the study concludes that most single motherhood are not self-inflicted deliberately. Therefore, advocates that there is need for social re-orientation and acculturation of new practices for a better society.

Keywords: Motherhood, Parenting, Single, Stigmatization, Women.**Word Count:** 213.

Introduction

The excitement of singlehood for most girl child is to get married especially in societies with deep-rooted cultural values, as marriage and motherhood are often seen as pivotal milestones for women, with motherhood particularly conferring a sense of duty and reverence. As noted by Alenkhe and Akaba (2013), the status of motherhood places women in a unique position, often in alignment with their spouses, and this societal expectation creates an aspirational drive toward marriage for many women, as it is traditionally viewed as a gateway to social acceptance and fulfillment. However, despite this widespread cultural reverence for marriage and motherhood, the prevalence of single motherhood is on the rise, which brings with it a host of stigmatizations.

The family, as society's fundamental unit, plays a vital role in shaping development. Various family structures, including co-parenting, dual parenting, and single parenting, significantly influence societal outcomes, both positively and negatively (Ekeanyanwu, 2021; Regner, 2023). Data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that 0.2% of men and 0.3% of women have legally dissolved their marriages, while less than 1% of couples acknowledge being separated (The Vanguard, 2024). This suggests a growing phenomenon of single-parent households caused by divorce, separation, abandonment, or the death of a spouse. Single mothers, in particular, are often subject to social marginalization, as their status deviates from the traditional family structure.

The stigma associated with single parenthood, particularly divorce, raises questions about the legitimacy of such discrimination. Common indicators of this stigma include stereotypes, economic disparities, and limited educational and employment opportunities across diverse backgrounds and circumstances (Goodall & Cook, 2020; Jones et al., 2022). Despite the

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increasing rates of single motherhood, there is a lack of comprehensive research addressing the psychological, social, and economic impacts of this stigmatization.

The increasing prevalence of single-parent families, particularly mother-child households, highlights a significant gap in understanding the socio-economic and relational factors contributing to this trend. Reduced social esteem for stable unions and the rise of non-marital relationships are identified as key factors driving long-term child poverty in Nigeria (Chukwuka, 2018; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016). Single mothers face unique challenges, including financial strain and fears for their children's future, particularly concerns that their daughters may also face single parenthood. Their diverse circumstances—ranging from divorce, separation, or widowhood to assisted reproduction, adoption, or casual relationships—further complicate the social and economic pressures they encounter (Bernardi et al., 2018).

Single parenthood is associated with two types of stigmatizations namely; social and self-stigma. Social stigma arises from public perceptions of the group, while self-stigma occurs when individuals internalize these societal judgments about their situation (Kim, Jeon & Melody, 2023). Both forms contribute to the experience of stigmatization by single mothers. Hence this study examines the stigmatization of single motherhood in Benin City. Edo State

Objective of the study
1. Determine the social perception and causes of single mothers in Benin metropolis.
2. To examine the types as well as levels of stigmatization of single mothers in Benin metropolis
3. To investigate the implication and coping strategies utilized among single mothers in Benin metropolis

Scope of the study
This study was conducted in Selected communities in Benin metropolis and they include Ogbe, Ewase Iwogban, Uteh and Egor.

Brief literature and Theoretical Orientation
Parenting is a responsibility as well as a reflection of social norm (Alenkhe, 2013). Raising a single child refers to a situation where one or two of the people involved in the child's creation is responsible for its upbringing. However, when the role is relinquished on a single individual it becomes a different connotation "Single parenting". According to Chike (2024), Single parenting alone has a number of reasons. Nonetheless, the surge in single parenting over the past few decades is highlighted by two significant demographic trends the natural cause (Death) and the man-made cause (Divorce/separation).

Divorce
Adejoh, Kuteyi, Ogunsola, and Adeoye (2019) identify divorce as a leading cause of single parenting in developed countries, with many children living in single-parent households due to separation. Nwachuku (2006) argues that divorce fosters negative attitudes toward marriage, promoting single parenthood. Common reasons women cite for divorce include addiction, adultery, violence, abandonment, and spousal incarceration. The death of a spouse also contributes to single-parent families. Allers (2016) states that nearly half of marriages end in divorce, significantly increasing the number of single-parent households

Death of one Parent
Amato (2000) argues that historically, single-parent households were often the result of a parent's death, with one-fourth of children born in the 1800s losing a parent before age fifteen. Today, increasing divorce rates and shifting social trends are key drivers of single-parent families. Bernardi, Dimitri, and Ornella (2018) note that in the UK, about 10% of the 3 million single parents are men. Research primarily focuses on single mothers, who generally face lower socioeconomic status, poorer health, and higher psychological distress, contributing to higher mortality rates among this group in the UK (Bernardi et al., 2018)

Theoretical Orientation
Max Weber's social action theory explores the motives behind individuals' behaviours, shaped by their interpretations of situations. He identified four types of social action, two rational and two social, emphasizing how meaning and context influence human actions and decision-making (Gerth & Mills, 2014).

Weber defined four basic types of social action. These are:
1. Actions are shaped by anticipated reactions of individuals and objects within one's environment.
2. Actions are driven by absolute values rooted in ethical, aesthetic, or religious principles
3. Actions are influenced by emotional responses toward people and objects in one's surroundings.
4. Actions are shaped by adherence to long-standing societal traditions

Weber argued that modern society is characterized by a shift from socially-driven behaviours to rational, goal-oriented actions (Goffman, 2002).

Max Weber's social action theory explain the stigmatization of single motherhood by focusing on how individuals' behaviours are shaped by societal expectations and values. First, individuals may stigmatize single mothers based on societal norms that expect traditional family structures (Type 1 action). Second, stigmatization may arise from moral or religious values that favour marriage and view single motherhood negatively (Type 2 action). Emotional responses, such as discomfort or disapproval, also contribute to stigma (Type 3 action). Lastly, long-standing cultural traditions reinforce these negative attitudes (Type 4 action), as single motherhood deviates from established societal norms.

Methodology
This study adopts both a cross-sectional research design in examining the types, causes and implication of stigmatization on single motherhood in Benin city. It triangulated both the qualitative and quantitative instruments (In-depth Interview and Semi-structured questionnaire) and method of data collection for 120 women selected using a multi-stage sampling technique for the study. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 22.0) and thematic content analysis for the qualitative data.

Findings

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N=120).

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Age of respondent	20-26years	24	20.0
	27-36yrs	36	30.0
	37 -46 yrs	26	21.7
	Above 47 yrs	34	28.3
Marital status	Married	72	60.0
	Separated/divorced	35	29.2
	Widowed	13	10.8
Religious affiliation	Christianity	84	70.0
	Muslims	33	27.5
	Traditionalist	03	02.5
Occupation of respondents	Civil servant	31	25.8
	Trader	42	35.0
	Banker	12	10.0
	Fashion designer	26	21.7
	Others	09	07.5
Socio-economic status	Low	47	39.2
	Middle	67	55.8
	High	06	5.0
Ethnic group of respondents	Edo	67	55.8
	Yoruba	12	10.0
	Ibo	07	5.3
	Ishan	28	23.3
	Others	06	5.0

Fieldwork 2024

The socio-demographic profile of 120 respondents shows a diverse yet distinct distribution across several variables. The largest age group is 27-36 years (30%), followed by those above 47 years (28.3%), indicating a middle-aged population. The majority of respondents are married (60%), while 29.2% are separated or divorced, and 10.8% are widowed. On religiously affiliation, 70% of the respondents identify as Christians, with 27.5% Muslims and a small fraction of 2.5% as traditionalists. In terms of occupation, most respondents are traders (35%), followed by civil servants (25.8%), fashion designers (21.7%), and bankers (10%). Socio-economically, a significant portion (55.8%) belongs to the middle class, with 39.2% in the lower class and only 5% in the higher class.

Ethnically, over half the respondents are Edo (55.8%), while 23.3% are Ishan, followed by smaller groups of Yoruba (10%) and Ibo (5.3%). This reflects a predominantly Edo and middle-class population with varied occupational backgrounds

Objective One: social perception and causes of single mothers in Benin metropolis (N=120).

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
What is your perception about single motherhood	It is a choice	19	15.8
	It is a natural occurrence	16	13.3
	It portrays irresponsible womanhood	35	29.2
	Society frowns at it	20	16.7
	better than marital tragedy	16	13.3
	Not bad at all	14	11.7
What do you think causes single motherhood	Death of spouse	22	18.3
	Irreconcilable differences	28	22.3
	Infidelity	12	10.0
	Trust issues	10	08.3
	Domestic violence	10	08.3
	Societal influence	25	20.8
	Competition among women	13	10.8
Are these causes natural or man-made	Natural	22	18.3
	Man-made	60	50.0
	Both	38	31.7

Fieldwork 2024

The data highlights varied perceptions of single motherhood. A significant portion of respondents (29.2%) associate single motherhood with irresponsible womanhood, while 15.8% see it as a personal choice. Some (16.7%) believe society frowns upon single motherhood, while others (13.3%) view it as a preferable option to staying in a troubled marriage. Additionally, 11.7% consider single motherhood to be not bad at all, suggesting a shift in attitudes. Regarding causes, the primary reasons for single motherhood are marital issues. Irreconcilable differences (22.3%) and infidelity (10%) are most frequently cited, indicating that relationship breakdowns are common triggers. Domestic violence (8.3%) and societal influence (20.8%) also play significant roles in contributing to single-parent households. The death of a

spouse is also noted as a cause (18.3%).

In support of the above data, a participant expatiated her opinion on single motherhood and the likely causes, as thus:

Most women in this vicinity have eyes outside, they don't want to suffer with their husband, they believe that marriage is always rosy, and when hard times come they want to pitch their tent somewhere else. My dear, the society we are in now single mother is now becoming a title without shame. And their children sometimes are riddles due to the activities of their mother (IDI-Trader- 45 years- Iwogban)

Another participant said:

We know widows are single mothers who were hit by natural cause(death), but the rate of divorce and separation as well as having babies out of wedlock is quiet alarming, that people say they are single mother without recourse. I weep! My friend, this generation have lost it oh. See single girls that want to live independent live, other ae happily divorced and some separated etc. Only God knows what is going on (IDI-Nurse- 52 years- Iwogban)

From the quantitative data above in objective one, most respondents (50%) believe the causes of single motherhood are man-made, such as relationship problems and societal pressures, while 18.3% attribute it to natural causes like the death of a spouse. A considerable portion (31.7%) sees the causes as a combination of both natural and man-made factors.

Objective two: types as well as levels of stigmatization of single mothers in Benin metropolis (N=120).

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
What are the types of single motherhood prevalent in this community	Having child out of wedlock	43	35.8
	Divorcee	23	19.2
	Widows	25	20.8
	Separated mothers	29	24.2
Are the above women often stigmatized?	Yes	82	68.3
	No	20	16.7
	Sometimes	18	15.0
How are they stigmatized	Constant alienation	22	22.0
	Looking with disdain	18	18.0
	Biased minded to the child	22	22.0
	Shaming them	25	25.0
	Snipping at single mothers	13	13.0
Is the level of stigmatization obvious	Yes	62	62.0
	To some extend	21	21.0
	Not really	17	17.0

Fieldwork 2024

The data reveals that the most prevalent form of single motherhood in this community results from having children out of wedlock, accounting for 35.8% of respondents. Separated mothers follow at 24.2%, highlighting a significant number of women who are not formally divorced but live apart from their partners. Widows make up 20.8% of single mothers, reflecting the impact of spousal death, while divorcees represent 19.2%, indicating that formal marital dissolution also contributes to single-parent households. A large majority of respondents (68.3%) believe that single mothers in the community face stigmatization. This stigmatization manifests in various forms, with shaming being the most common, reported by 25% of respondents. Constant alienation (22%) and biased attitudes toward the children of single mothers (22%) are also significant, reflecting a societal bias not only against the mothers but extending to their children as well. Looking at single mothers with disdain is another common form of stigma (18%), while 13% of respondents note verbal criticisms or subtle remarks aimed at single mothers.

When asked about the level of stigmatization, 62% of respondents believe it is obvious and prevalent in the community. An additional 21% feel that stigmatization occurs "to some extent," suggesting it may be more subtle or context-specific in some cases. However, 17% of respondents believe stigmatization is not particularly evident, reflecting a minority view that the community may be more accepting or indifferent toward single motherhood in certain circumstances.

In complementing the above data, a participant summarized the stigmatization faced by single motherhood. She said:

In this community there are many out-of-wedlock children, children of divorcee as well as fatherless children. Their mothers are often criticized and mocked especially in gathering, it may not be open but it is obvious from the body language of most residents. The women are sometimes pushed to the side when matters of marital discourse are deliberated. They are even shamed by their peers; it is not something to be proud of (IDI-Civil servant- 51 years-Egor)

Objective three: Implication and coping strategies utilized among single mothers in Benin metropolis (N=120).

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
What are the implications of stigmatizing single mother in your community	Creating vulnerable women	30	25.0
	Less confident children	21	17.5
	Alienation of single mothers	24	20.0
	Social stratification	19	15.8
	Wayward single mothers	26	21.7
What are the coping strategies utilized by most single mothers in your locality	Attending regular church services	25	20.8
	Attending party	16	13.4
	Often times indoor	31	25.8

	Drinking and playing music	21	17.5
	Busy engaging in economic activities	27	22.5
Are these coping strategies sustainable	Yes	54	45.0
	Not really	32	26.7
	No	34	28.3

Fieldwork 2024

The data reveals significant implications of stigmatizing single mothers. The most frequent outcome is creating vulnerable women (25%), followed by perceptions of wayward behavior (21.7%) and the alienation of single mothers (20%). Stigmatization also impacts children, with 17.5% noting that children of single mothers tend to be less confident. Additionally, 15.8% of respondents believe that such stigmatization contributes to social stratification, reinforcing a cycle of marginalization. Single mothers adopt various coping strategies. The most common is staying indoors (25.8%), which may help them avoid societal judgment but can lead to isolation. Others engage in economic activities (22.5%) for financial independence, while a significant number rely on religious support by attending church services (20.8%). Drinking and playing music (17.5%) and attending parties (13.4%) are also used as temporary escapes.

As for sustainability, opinions are divided. About 45% believe these coping strategies, particularly economic activities and church attendance, are sustainable. However, 26.7% are uncertain, and 28.3% think they are unsustainable, especially methods like isolation, drinking, and avoidance, which may not address the root challenges.

In complementing the above data, a participant said:

The implication of single motherhood is enormous, from creating abusive children to bringing less confident children up. The mothers are not left behind as they are often push aside and the only way they cope is to be either too religious or worldly like attending useless party and dressing waywardly. Some even end up becoming smokers and addict drunkard. They are some behind my compound here (IDI-Hotel Manager-44years- Uselu)

From the above data, it is obvious that there is a divide in whether these coping strategies are seen as sustainable, reflecting the complexity of single mothers' experiences in the face of stigma. Overall, the findings highlight both the struggles and resilience of single mothers in coping with stigma

Conclusion

In conclusion, single motherhood in the community is largely due to out-of-wedlock births and separations, with widows and divorcees also contributing. The majority of respondents (68.3%) report that single mothers face significant stigmatization, including public shaming, alienation, and negative attitudes toward their children. Most respondents believe this stigma is highly visible, reflecting deep societal bias. While a small minority see less stigma, the prevailing view highlights ongoing marginalization of single mothers. Stigmatization of single mothers leads to vulnerability, alienation, and negative impacts on children. While coping strategies like economic activities and church attendance are seen as sustainable, isolation and avoidance are not. The findings stress the need for greater awareness and support to reduce stigma and create a more inclusive, respectful environment for single-parent families.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusion, the study advocates the following;

1. Community leaders, mass media and Governmental agencies in charge of awareness creation should increase awareness raising to launch community programs in educating people about single mothers' challenges and reduce stigma.
2. Government, communities and non-governmental organization as well as religious bodies need to provide support, by creating support groups and counselling services tailored to single mothers' emotional and psychological needs
3. There is need for economic empowerment by corporate bodies and individual as well as non-governmental organization, to offer vocational training and financial support to help single mothers achieve financial independence.
4. Government needs to create child support programme by implementing policies that provide better resources and opportunities for children in single-parent households.
5. Finally, community should collaborate in Strengthen partnerships with religious and community organizations to offer sustainable, non-judgmental support for single mothers.

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