

Voices Of Vulnerability: Exploring Mental Health And Behavioral Patterns In Single Parent Children

R. Monica¹, Dr. P. G. Sunanda Bhagavathy²

Research Scholar, Division of Criminology and Forensic Sciences, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, monicar21@karunya.edu.in, Orcid: 0009-0008-2149-1351

Professor, Division of Criminology and Forensic Sciences, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, Sunanda@karunya.edu, Orcid: 0000-0001-5838-6063

Abstract:

As, in the current scenario victimization of children is found to be prevalent and that too the plight of single parent children is inexplicable. Single parent children are reportedly the one who are most vulnerable and victimized obviously as their single parent would be the sole bread winner, so that the quality time they spend with their children would be probably less and this might lead to emotional and psychological harms like depression, lonely, neglected, aggressive and deviant behavior. The increased number of single parenthood often leads to serious societal problems like Juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, beggary, child labor, malnourishment, health issues and welfare dependency. Sometimes due to financial crisis, there might be poverty where these children are underfed and unhealthy both physically and psychologically. As they are in their psychosexual stages of development, in one way or the other, it is affecting their physical and mental health, education and their entire behavioral pattern. If these issues which pave the way for mental health issues and deviant behaviors in the future are left unaddressed, then it obviously shows that we are leading the adolescents towards an unhealthy future. This rare study aims at analyzing the emotional and behavioral state of single parent children studying in Government schools in Coimbatore city using the diagnostic research design through 'Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire'. Strength and Difficulties questionnaire helps to find Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity/inattention, Peer relationship related problems and pro-social behavior. This study has a holistic approach where it assesses not only the opinion of children but also their parents' and teachers and to suggest possible solutions to improve the conditions.

Key words: Mental health, Victimization, single parenthood, Deviant behavior, Delinquency, vulnerability.

1. Background:

Parenting is a grand adventure, a journey of self-discovery, resilience, and the pure joy of witnessing a little soul blossom into its unique brilliance (Sarah Ban Breathnach). It is an exquisite odyssey where the parents not only mould their children but do inspire them. This beautiful journey becomes a profound responsibility when the burden lies on a single parent, as bringing them up, earning for living, taking care of the children, spending quality time and everything else has to be taken care of by the single person all by themselves. The recent UN women report says that almost 7.5 % of the households are led by single parents among which 4.5% (approximately 13 million) is led by the mothers. It is appreciable that numerous studies and researches are being done, addressing the challenges and hardships faced by the single parents in fostering the children but at the same time irony is that the trials endured by their children was not thrown into the limelight. This paper here introspect the predicament of the children of single parents and suggests possible solution for the better upbringing of those younglings.

1.1 Struggles in single parent families:

Single parenting is a state where either the father or the mother has to take up the paramount responsibility of fostering the child all alone. This might be due to the loss of any one of the parent, separation of the parents and sometimes unwed pregnancy. Whatever the case maybe, all the above instances will push either of the parents to bear the burden even if he/she doesn't wish to do it alone. Obviously, the journey of parenthood is a beautiful fairytale when the loads of responsibilities are being shared among the parents. But if this road of parenting taken by a single parent, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, happily or unhappily may have its own predicament. Single parenting can impact child development in several ways. Children of single parents often have poor academic performance,

decreased social interactions, emotional and behavioral problems.(Chavda & Nisarga, 2023) Achieving a better understanding of why children of single mothers are at increased risk for maladjustment is a worthwhile research endeavor, as elucidating mechanisms that help explain this relationship can better inform clinical interventions. Unfortunately, research on potential mechanisms has been quite limited.

1.2 Financial struggles:

Single parent families are at high risk of financial hardship which may impact on psychological wellbeing (Taylor & Conger, 2017). In current scenario where the costs of living are becoming really high, single earning could not help in running the family effectively. In most of the families, especially in middle class and lower middle class families both the parents are working to meet the financial demands of the family including basic needs, education and other miscellaneous expenditures. In India, housewives are traditionally expected to care for their family, including their children. In these situations, when the husband is absent because of death, desertion, or separation, the family's income drastically declines and the wife bears the full burden of providing for the family, leading to single-mother or mother-headed households. The mothers often have to work outside, leaving the kids alone at home so that they can take care of themselves. Due to their financial circumstances, some women are unable to hire paid caretakers to take care of their children. Those children face significant hardships when their mothers are absent from the home. These mothers often struggle to meet even the most basic needs of their children such as food, clothing, and shelter due to overwhelming economic pressures. As a result, the quality of care provided is frequently inadequate, even when some resources are available. Many children are forced to drop out of school because their mothers cannot afford essential supplies like books and uniforms. In some cases, children are expected to contribute financially, taking on the role of breadwinners to help support the family's limited income. In this way the absence of parent and unbearable financial needs have adverse effect on the well being of the single parent children. The poverty rate of lone mother households is 38% in comparison to 22.6% for dual parent households (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Save the Children, 2020; UNICEF, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

1.3 socialization and conditioning of the children:

Often, a mother's focus on securing her own survival leaves her with limited time and energy to nurture her children's mental and physical development. In many Indian households, fathers traditionally take on the role of disciplinarian. In their absence, the responsibility of raising and guiding the children falls entirely on the mother, further complicating her already challenging role. Children raised in single-parent households experience a distinctive socialization process shaped by the unique structure and dynamics of their family environment. The absence of a second parental figure often requires the sole caregiver to adopt multiple roles, which may influence both parenting style and behavioral conditioning (Amato, 2005). Social learning in these contexts tends to be concentrated around the behaviors, values, and coping mechanisms exhibited by the single parent, thereby intensifying the impact of role modeling. Furthermore, economic constraints common in single-parent families can limit access to enriching social opportunities, affecting children's peer interactions and broader community engagement. Operant conditioning through reinforcement or punishment remains a central mechanism in shaping behavior, yet may be inconsistently applied due to time or emotional stress. Despite these challenges, many children in single-parent households develop strong adaptive skills, such as resilience and autonomy, especially when emotional support and consistent routines are present. Peer relationships and community involvement often serve as supplemental avenues for social development, mitigating potential deficits in parental availability. While societal stigma may further complicate the socialization experience, children in these settings often thrive when supported by stable care giving and access to social resources (Amato, 2005).

1.4 Peer pressure:

Peer pressure, especially in young adults plays a crucial role in determining their physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral changes. That too if that adolescent is a neglected and unconcerned one with reduced attention then there are more possibilities that they depend on their fellow peer group for emotional and moral support. Adolescents who exhibit delinquent tendencies or are considered high-risk often find themselves drawn to peers who engage in deviant or risky behaviors. This affiliation, however, is not merely a reflection of their existing behavioral patterns. Research

consistently shows that interaction with deviant peers can significantly intensify and escalate delinquent behaviors—contributing to outcomes that surpass what might be expected from individual predispositions alone (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Warr, 2002; Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002). This peer influence not only affects their growth but also leads to absenteeism, deviant behavior ([Thornberry & Krohn, 1997](#)), drug abuse ([Dishion & Medici Skaggs, 2000](#); [Thornberry & Krohn, 1997](#)), and high risk sexual behaviors ([Dishion, 2000](#)). Deviant peer affiliation is a stronger predictor of delinquent behavior than variables such as family, school, and community characteristics ([Elliott & Menard, 1996](#)). Sociological studies have shown that deviant behavior is concentrated in certain adolescent groups. Gangs, cliques, and peer groups vary in their overall rates of deviance, but if one member of a group engages in problem behavior, a high probability exists that other members will do the same. ([Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988](#); [Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995](#)).

1.5 Mental health:

Children from divorced homes have less language stimulation, are more likely to have lower grades, are more likely to repeat a year of school, have lower math and science scores, and are more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities (Anderson, 2014). Children who come from one-parent households can often feel greater risks to their mental health due to the weight of emotional distress, financial hardship, and not receiving as much attention from their parents. Because of these challenges, children can also experience an unstable living situation, along with inconsistent caregiving, and feel less attached to the parent in care of their needs. These situations can contribute to anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and behavioural problems (Amato, 2005). When a household is experiencing economic hardship, stress levels can rise, which adds tension to the household that can affect the emotional health of the child (Cairney et al., 2003). There is typically less available reactive and proactive emotional support and when children do not receive this support from their one parent, it may hinder their development and coping skills that are made through interaction with others. Over periods of time, if challenges persist the confidence, coping skills, and academic performance of the child can be impacted, which can contribute to increased potential for developing mental health challenges in the future (Lipman et al., 2002).

1.6 Love and Relationships:

Adolescents from single-parent families are searching for emotional safety, loyalty, and a sense of belonging through close relationships; particularly with romantic partners. While it is expected for adolescents to look for love, trust, and belonging during this developmental stage, minors from single-parent families can substitute strong romantic relationships for unmet emotional needs when the single parent is not consistently providing emotional connections, to include times when a parent might be available but is too exhausted to emotionally nurture their child, and this hinges on time spent, (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). While adolescents are searching for love and care they will typically seek to be embraced by peers. Peers are a significant component of identity development. In scenarios where the peers are expressing views and behaviors that align with romance relationships to increase social status such as popularity (not solely friendship) adolescents will be compelled to accept peer expectations as social pressure. The adolescents have not necessarily developed emotionally or even if they have, the adolescent may have been exposed to those needs, puts the adolescent at risk of becoming involved in a romantic relationship before they are emotionally prepared or interested solely vested to remain part of a group and not excluded (Brown, 1999). This type of peer influence may be especially potent in the context of the emotional vulnerabilities associated with growing up in a single-parent family. These adolescents may be more likely to adopt negative peer norms (such as risky dating behaviors or relationships that are emotionally unhealthy) as they try to fill the emotional gaps in their lives and reach out for validation (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In this way, the desire for connection is both good and normal, but the context of the relationships in which the connection is made could influence the quality of those relationships and their longer-term effects on emotional well-being.

1.7 Substance Abuse and Deviant behavior:

Studies show that being in a bad company or peer influence has association with deviant behaviors like drug use (Dishion & Medici Skaggs, 2000; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997), anti social behavior and delinquent behavior and criminal activities, risk of early sexual behaviors. Children growing up in single-parent families often face unique

challenges that can increase their vulnerability to substance use and behavioral issues. The absence of one parent can lead to emotional gaps, reduced supervision, and added financial stress factors that together create an environment where children may struggle to cope. As a result, many turn to substances like alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, not out of delinquency, but as a way to manage stress, sadness, or peer pressure (Hoffmann, 2002). These children are also more likely to engage in behaviors such as truancy, aggression, or defiance, especially when they lack a stable emotional anchor or consistent guidance (Demuth & Brown, 2004). Single parents, often stretched between work and care giving responsibilities, may unintentionally provide less time and emotional availability, leaving children feeling neglected or unsupported (Barajas, 2011). Boys in particular, especially those growing up without fathers, are found to be at a higher risk for involvement in delinquent or criminal behavior (Caldwell, Sturges, & Silver, 2007). The stress experienced by single parents can also lead to inconsistent discipline and reduced ability to manage behavioral issues effectively (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). To break this cycle, it is essential to provide holistic support—both to the children and their caregivers. Schools can play a key role by offering counseling and creating inclusive environments, while community programs and flexible workplace policies can relieve some of the burdens placed on single parents. Above all, recognizing the resilience of single-parent families and equipping them with meaningful resources can empower children to thrive, regardless of their family structure (Amato, 2005).

2. METHODOLOGY:

Quantitative research is a widely respected approach in the scientific community, known for its structured and systematic investigation of measurable phenomena. Its core aim is to assess and quantify variables, uncover relationships, and identify patterns within data using statistical techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By focusing on numerical evidence, this method allows researchers to test specific hypotheses, predict outcomes, and draw conclusions that can often be generalized to larger populations. What sets quantitative research apart is its emphasis on objectivity and empirical observation; researchers strive to eliminate bias and rely solely on data that can be observed, quantified, and verified (Babbie, 2020). Unlike qualitative approaches that explore lived experiences and subjective narratives, quantitative research is rooted in facts and figures, making it especially useful when the goal is to establish causality or evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. It clearly defined variables, research questions, and hypotheses ensure clarity and reproducibility, which are essential elements of credible scientific inquiry. This study adopted a quantitative approach by using diagnostic research design to explore the emotional and behavioral challenges faced by children from single-parent families. The samples for this study were chosen by using purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is a deliberate and strategic method used by researchers to select participants who are most likely to provide relevant, insightful, and meaningful information aligned with the study's goals (Kelly, 2010). Rather than choosing participants randomly, this approach focuses on identifying individuals who possess specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics that are particularly valuable to the research topic. It is especially useful when resources such as time and funding are limited, as it allows researchers to focus their efforts on cases that offer the greatest potential for rich data (Palinkas et al., 2015). The rationale behind using purposive sampling lies in the understanding that, based on the research objectives, certain people are better positioned to share diverse or critical perspectives on the issue being studied (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014; Trost, 1986). This method ensures that the sample includes voices that truly matter to the inquiry, ultimately enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings. A total number of 60 participants were selected through purposive sampling method, focusing on children from government and corporation schools located in the Thondamuthur block, Coimbatore.

The data were collected from both single-parent children and their respective parents, providing a more comprehensive perspective on the children's psychological and behavioral well-being. To assess these aspects, the researcher employed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a standardized tool developed by Dr. Goodman. The SDQ is a well-validated instrument comprising 42 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, covering five key dimensions: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems, and pro-social behavior. Based on the participants' responses, individual scores were calculated to determine the severity of each dimension. The results allowed for categorization of the children's psychological profiles into mild, moderate,

or severe levels of vulnerability in the respective domains. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the socio-emotional challenges encountered by single-parent children in the selected region.

3. RESULTS:

The findings have both self and parent version of factors such as Emotion, Conduct, Hyperactivity and Peer pressure that contributes to the overall difficulty score. Each score ranging from close to average risk, moderate risk and high risk. The score in each section denotes that they are having issues right now or might have issues in that particular aspect in future. The scores had been calculated on the basis of the scoring key given along with the Strength Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ).

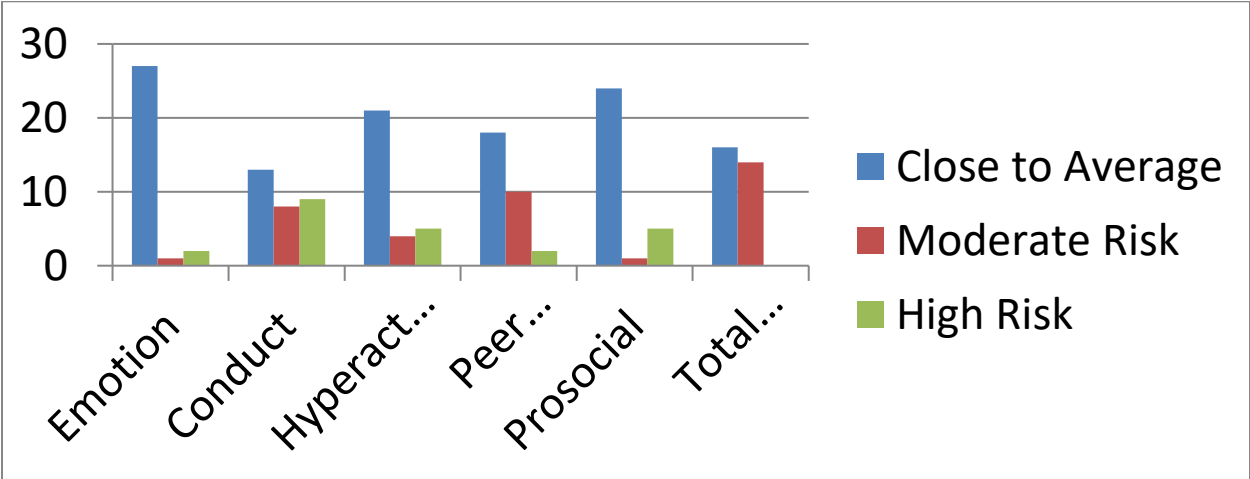


Fig 1: SELF REPORT OF SINGLE PARENT CHILDREN

The self reports from children of single-parent families demonstrate a significant range in psychosocial functioning in multiple domains. For emotional wellbeing, participants reported that 90% of them risked in the average range; 3% reported moderate risk; and 7% identified risk of high levels of emotional distress. In terms of hyperactivity, 70% of respondents reported nearly average levels of risk; 13% reported moderate risk; and 17% reported high risk levels. With respect to conduct and self-regulation related issues, participants reported that 43% of them were at average risk; 27% met moderate risk; and 30% identified high risk for future conduct-related issues. Peer relationship issues were also present; where participants reported that 60% were at average risk; 33% at moderate risk; and 7% at high risk. Regarding pro-social behavior, participants reported that 80% were functioning at average levels; 3% met moderate levels of difficulty; and 17% were at high risk for pro-social deficits. These findings highlight that children from single-parent households exhibit varying degrees of psychosocial risk, and demonstrate the need for early support and intervention.

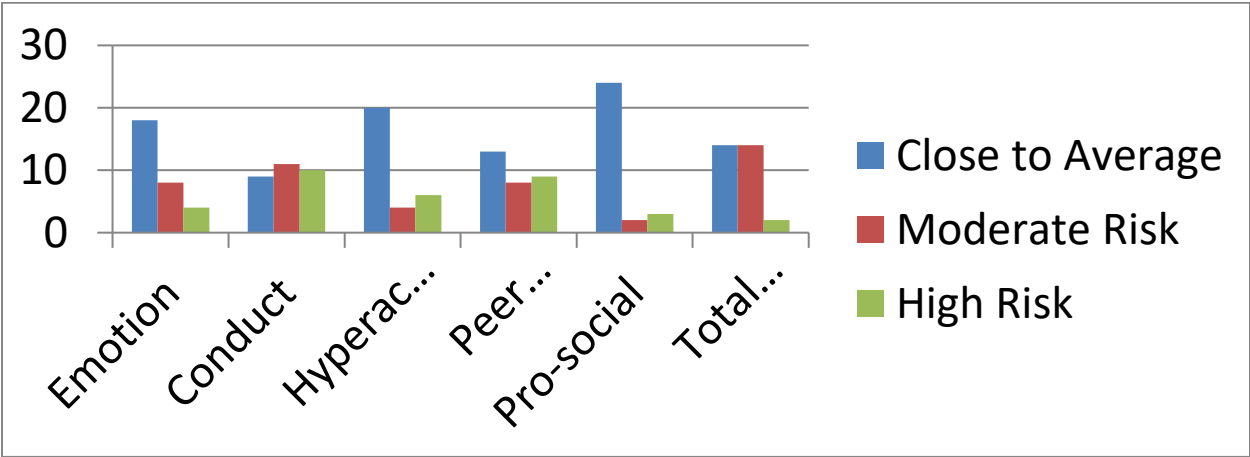


Fig 2 : REPORT OF SINGLE PARENTS

There was a significant variability in parental ratings of the psychosocial functioning of their children across emotional, behavioral and social domains. In the emotional domain, 60% of single parents reported their children to be at average risk for emotional difficulties, 27% at moderate risk, and 13% at high risk. In the domain of hyperactivity, 67% considered their children to be at average risk, while 13% and 20% were rated at moderate and high risk of hyperactivity, respectively. There were more concerns regarding conduct, as only 30% of children were rated at average risk for behavioural or disciplinary difficulties, with 37%, and 33% rated at moderate and high risk, respectively. Parents reported concerning peer relationships too, with 43% rating their children at average risk, 27% moderate risk, and 30% high risk. In terms of pro-social behaviour, the majority of children (83%) were deemed to be functioning at an average level, and only 7% and 10% rated at moderate and high risk, respectively. Upon reflection, these data highlight the complexity of psychosocial risks experienced by children, as reported by single parents and they indicate a need to develop target interventions to address those risks emerging in childhood.

4. DISCUSSION:

When it comes to the unique challenges that children from single-parent households face, it's crucial to take a well-rounded approach to support their emotional well-being and academic growth. The first step is raising awareness among parents and teachers about the heightened vulnerability of these kids. Schools should set up structured support systems, like peer buddy programs, to offer emotional support and help these children feel more socially connected. Having student counselors in every school, especially in government and aided institutions that serve middle-class and low-income families, can provide essential psychological support for students who are struggling. It's also important for teachers and school staff to be trained to spot early signs of mental health issues and to make timely referrals through the right channels to ensure that students get the help they need. Additionally, educational institutions should pay special attention to the academic and emotional needs of children from single-parent families. From a policy perspective, workplaces should think about offering flexible hours and extra leave for single parents, allowing them to better meet their children's needs. Setting up subsidized daycare centers and crèches for single parents in both the public and private sectors can really help ease the burden of childcare. On the home front, it's vital for single parents to spend quality time with their children to help reduce feelings of loneliness and neglect. Plus, improving job opportunities and creating job reservations for widows and single parents in government jobs can lead to greater financial stability. It's also essential for government bodies and NGOs to work together to address the broader well-being and economic needs of single-parent families. All these targeted strategies aim to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for both single parents and their children, ensuring their holistic development.

5. CONCLUSION:

Mental illness... occurs when our mental health is compromised or neglected for so long that it affects our ability to function in our everyday life (Kati Morton 2018). It is obvious, that these small issues, if neglected might bring big disasters into the lives of these little buds. Findings of previous studies and this study vividly shows that the children of single parents are vulnerable and victimized. This study brings to light the often-overlooked emotional and behavioural struggles faced by children growing up in single-parent households, especially those enrolled in government schools across Coimbatore. These children frequently navigate complex challenges feelings of loneliness, emotional neglect, and behavioural issues all of which are compounded by limited parental presence and financial hardship. The use of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) uncovered concerning patterns in emotional well-being, peer interactions, and conduct, pointing to a clear and urgent need for targeted support. Addressing these issues calls for a compassionate, multi-layered approach that unites schools, families, communities, and policymakers. Schools, in particular, must become safe and nurturing spaces equipped with trained counsellors and staff who can recognize early signs of distress and respond effectively (Kieling et al., 2011). Introducing peer support programs and fostering inclusive classroom environments can help children feel seen, heard, and supported. At the same time, flexible workplace policies for single parents and expanded access to affordable childcare would relieve some of the

pressures on caregivers, allowing them to be more present in their children's lives (Amato, 2005). More broadly, supporting children from single-parent homes is not just an educational or policy concern—it is a moral imperative and a shared societal duty. When we invest in their well-being today, we lay the foundation for a more resilient, empathetic, and equitable society tomorrow. This research offers valuable insights that can inform meaningful interventions and policies, helping ensure that every child, regardless of family structure, has the opportunity to grow, thrive, and contribute positively to their community. As change does not happen overnight, everyone should be made aware of the existence of these mental health issues in order to provide them with support and to gradually move from illness to wellness.

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