

Exploring family resilience among families headed by a single mother in Budiro, Harare

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Abstract: Background: Single mother headed families are on the rise globally. The greatest challenge has been a paradigm shift in marriage resulting in less endurance in marriage. However, an understanding of their strength has been a marginalized area. This study **aimed** to identify the socio-demographic characteristics and family resilience factors among families headed by single mothers. **Method:** The method of the study was quantitative and qualitative in nature, where 100 single mothers heading families in an urban area. They answered a questionnaire and an open-ended question on what family factors help them to cope with life challenges. The data was analysed using statistical hand calculation and interpretive phenomenological explication method by Hycner.

Results: The study identified the following factors from qualitative research: spirituality, working hard, time spent with others, coherence, social support, and communication. The quantitative approach identified the following factors: Family Hardiness Index (FHI) and Family Time Routine Index (FTRI), as statistically significant resilient factors.

Conclusion: These findings indicate that individual attributes and support from significant others are essential for single mothers to cope. Therefore, health authorities should assist single mother-headed families to identify various forms of support and how to access them to be resilient. The study is expected to contribute to nurturing and strengthening families headed by a single mother.

Keywords: Single mother, single mother headed family, family resilience, coping, challenges.

Introduction

Single mother headed families (SMHF) are reported by Kramer (2019) to be on the rise, accompanied by a decrease in marriage rates. America is the highest with 23%, Russia 18%, Kenya and France 16%, and South Africa and Zimbabwe within a range of 6.5-14.9%, whilst the global average is about 6.8%. Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1999) found that children from SMHF experience financial problems, adverse outcomes (such as low academic achievement and more behavioural issues). Single mothers experience challenges relating to psychological distress and mental health issues, financial difficulties, and issues surrounding role overload (Cheeseman, 2010). Also, possible social stigma, especially among people who do not understand the condition, results in an extra burden on the children and their caregivers.

Various studies (Richard, Gaskin, Alexandre, Burke, & Younis, 2014; Richard, 2016) have focused on inabilities, such as a mother's disability status or children's health (emotional and behavioural problems). Focus on single mother-headed families should be shifted from risk to resilience. The existence of single mother-headed families globally and in Zimbabwe suggests that some of these families have found ways of coping with their challenges. This might be the same reason why the research on schizophrenia begun. In the study, a historical overview of resilience provided by Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) identified its possible origin in schizophrenia, focusing on the risk of developing psychopathology. Coleman and Ganong (2002) suggest that the focus shifted over time from risk to resilience.

The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress." This definition has limitations, which Southwick, Douglas-Palumberi, & Pietrzak (2014) suggest to be its failure to reveal the complex nature of resilience. The interaction of various determinants of resilience (such as biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors) determines how people cope with stress. Since there are multiple ways to view resilience, this study will view resilience as an outcome and not a process or trait.

Resilience likely exists with differing degrees across multiple domains of life (Pietrzak and Southwick, 2011). A review of a study by Mashego and Taruvinga (2014) focusing on teenagers from divorced families indicates that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of these teenagers' cope following parental divorce. Specific family resilience factors are significant in enhancing teenagers' adaptation following parental divorce. In the current study, a resilience trajectory is characterized by a stressor (single mother heading a family) causing disequilibrium. However, continued health exists (an outcome of coping) (Bonanno, Westphal & Mancini, 2011).

This study aims to identify the socio-demographics of families headed by a single mother and family resilience factors, which may help them to cope.

Methodology

The survey was conducted with 100 single mothers heading families. Participants were recruited in Harare between May to July 2014. The researchers used stratified random sampling to recruit mothers heading households (from the following strata; widowed, divorced, single by choice, and ones with a husbands who are migrant worker). Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that specific subgroups found in the population represented in the sample (Murphy, 2021). This study has used qualitative method to ensure depth of understanding while quantitative methods were used to achieve breadth of understanding of resilience among the participants (Patton, 2002).

The researcher conducted the survey, a black female mother tongue of Shona language. The researcher recruited participants from communities where the researchers has lived, and the inhabitants mainly communicate in Shona.

Participants

The researchers examined data from 100 single mothers heading families who had participated in a study exploring family resilience and single mother heading a family. All the participants were single mothers, with varying reasons such as being widowed 25% (n=25), divorced 25% (n=25), single by choice 25% (n=25), and those which husbands who were migrant workers 25% (n=25). About 12% (n=12) had primary education, 26% (n=26) had high school education while 62% (n=62) had tertiary education. The majority of the participants, about 96% (n=96) were Shona speakers, the Ndebele speakers, and those of other languages were 2% (n=2) each. About 71% (n=71) of the single mothers were below the age of 50 years. Also, 70% of single mothers were employed. Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 Sample Demographic Characteristics

Variable	n (%)	Variable	n (%)
Marital Status		Home Language	
Widowed	25	Shona	96
Divorced	25	Ndebele	02
Husband Migrant Worker	25	Other Languages	02
Single mother by choice	25		
Level of Education		Age	
Primary	12	20-29	18
High School	26	30-39	28
Diploma	33	40-49	25
Degree	23	50-59	20
Other (Certificate, Masters & Ph.D.)	06	60-69	09
Nature of Employment			
Temporary	11		
Permanent	59		
Self-Employed	30		

Measures

The questionnaire comprised of the following sections: biographical data, Family Attachment, and Changeability Index 8. (FACI8), Family Problem Solving Communication (FPSC), Family Time Routine Index (FTRI), Social Support Index (SSI), Relative and Friend Support (RFS), Family Crises Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales (F-COPES), and Family Hardiness Index (FHI). FACI8 scale consists of 16 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from never, Sometimes, Half The Time, More Than Half, and Always. FPSC scale is a 10-item instrument with a four-point Likert Scale-False, Mostly false, Mostly true, True. FTRI scale is a 30 item scale with a four-point Likert Scale-False, Mostly false, Mostly true, True (McCubbin, Thompson and McCubbin, 1996b). SSI scale consists of 17 items on a five-point Likert scale (McCubbin, Patterson and Glynn, 1996a) ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” RFS scale consists of eight items on a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” F-COPES consists of 30 items on a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” FHI scale consists of 20 items on

a 4-point Likert rating scale, the degree (False, Mostly false, Mostly true, True, or Not applicable) (McCubbin et al., 1996b).

Data Collection and analysis

The researcher collected the completed questionnaires after two days. One researcher translated the open-ended questions answered in Shona and passed them to another Shona speaker researcher for a quality check, which yielded minor corrections. After both rounds of analysis, the researchers negotiated consensus. Responses from open-ended questions were analysed using an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) as elucidated by Hycner (1999). The completed FPSC, FTRI, SSI, RFS, F-COPES, and FHI were subjected to correlation analysis, using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient, a statistical hand calculation, to assess the factors associated with family resilience.

Ethical approval

Women’s University in Africa granted ethical clearance to the study. Researchers also received permission from Budiriro authorities to conduct the survey. Written consent was obtained from the participants to complete the survey. The researchers took steps to protect the identity of participants when storing data (not using identifying material and kept the data locked from anyone who was not involved in the study) and reporting findings.

Results

• Correlation of Family resilience and associated factors

Various factors were correlated with FACI8 using Pearson Correlation Coefficient, a statistical hand calculation, and a significant association with each factor resulted in the factor’s identification as a family resilience factor.

Table 2: Correlation of Family Resilience (FACI8) with potential resilience factors

Family Resilience Factor	r value	Critical value
Family Problem Solving Communication (FPSC)	0.05	0.256
Family Time and Routine Index (FTRI)	0.468	0.256
Social Support Index	0.011	0.256
Relative and Family Support Index	0.180	0.256
Family Hardness Index	0.990	0.256
F-COPES	0.070	0.256

Alpha =0.01

FPSC, $|r| 0.05 < 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above) shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is an insignificant linear correlation between family resilience and FPSC. The FPSC scale assesses communication patterns in families during hardships and catastrophes (McCubbin et al., 1996b). Single mothers in this study perceived the use of affirming and incendiary communication to solve problems, calmness, and talking things through as trivial in helping them to cope.

FTRI, $|r| 0.468 > 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above) shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is a significant linear correlation between family resilience and FTRI. The FTRI scale is used to assess the type of activities and routines families use and maintain in life (McCubbin et al., 1996b). Single mothers in this study perceived the type of activities and routines families use and maintain as crucial in helping them to cope.

SSI, $|r| 0.011 < 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above) shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is an insignificant linear correlation between family resilience and SSI. The SSI scale is used to evaluate family degrees of integration into the community and view the community as a source of support (McCubbin et al., 1996a). Single mothers in this study perceived emotional support such as recognition and affirmation, esteem support (affection), and network support (relationships with relatives) provided by the community as trivial in helping them to cope.

RFS, $|r| 0.180 < 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above), shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is an insignificant linear correlation between family resilience and FRS. The FRS scale is used to measure the degree to which families use the support of relatives and friends as a coping strategy to manage stressors and strains (McCubbin et al., 1996b). Single mothers in this study perceived the support of relatives and friends as trivial in adjusting to the effects of stress.

FHI, $|r| 0.990 > 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above) shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is a significant linear correlation between family resilience and FHI. The FHI scale is used to measure how

hardiness is used as a resource to mediate the effects of stress in families and, in turn, facilitate family adjustment and coping (McCubbin et al., 1996b). Single mothers in this study perceived family hardiness as crucial in adjusting to the effects of stress.

F-COPES, $|r| 0.070 < 0.256$ (as shown in table 2 above) shows that at a 10% level of significance, there is an insignificant linear correlation between family resilience and F-COPES). The F-COPES scale is a scale used to identify the family's ability to engage in problem-solving and use behavioural strategies when in a crisis (McCubbin et al., 1996b). Single mothers in this study perceived engaging in problem-solving (individual family system) and using behavioural strategies (internal and external) as trivial in dealing with a crisis.

- **Factors associated with family resilience**

The single mothers heading families reported constant interaction with specific supportive factors in coping with their situation. They perceived support structures to be important in their everyday life. Single mothers heading families managed to identify factors associated with family resilience, which described their experience in coping with their challenges. There was some overlap in their ideas, which made it difficult to contrast the views.

- **Social Support**

Like other women, single mothers heading families have support structures that help them to cope with their situation. Among others, the support structures include relatives, friends, church members, and professionals. Social support was expressed in the following statements from the participants:

"When I was divorced, I thought my life had ended. But the support from my relatives and church members made me realize that there is still another chance to be a strong parent". (Participant 4)

"My mom takes care of my children when I am at work, that means I have fewer things worry about." (Participant 14)

"I was invited to workshops which explore ways of building your family, for example, single mother workshops or widows' meetings and discussions on how to cope with them." (Participant 7)

Single mothers heading families acknowledge that support from professionals and non-professionals has helped them to cope. Their experience seems to support the belief that there is strength in numbers.

- **Spirituality**

Single mothers believe spirituality to be a strength that comes from a higher power and spiritual and religious activities, which helps single mothers heading families to cope with their challenges. The majority of the participants associated their resilience to religion, faith, and belief. The responses from participants are as follows:

"The most important factor which has helped my family lately is faith that I will achieve every goal." (Participant 20)

"I strongly believe in the Almighty/ religion when faced with challenges. It always works well for me." (Participant 2)

There is a sense of positive perception among single mothers when focusing on spirituality. Their perception of spirituality gave them hope, which led to positive outcomes. The belief of single mothers in spirituality could be individual and, at times, shared within a family system.

- **Communication**

Many single mothers heading families stated that communication is the vehicle to achieve clarity and congruence in messages, which facilitates the provision of support by improving interaction. They help each other by communicating and aligning behavior to values or norms. The participants expressed this through the following statements:

"As a family, we have found out that communication is critical. Always say no when something that you do not like is done. At the same time, we praise each other when something good is done." (Participant 20)

"We have learnt that sharing our secrets as a family helps us to be strong and to overcome our challenges." (Participant 2)

There should be open communication channels to facilitate the sharing of sensitive life experiences with significant people. Clear communication helps them to learn from each other, which enhances family cohesion.

○ **Time spent together and shared activities.**

Single mothers heading families view spending time together as a family as helpful in providing a context for adjustment after adverse events and restores a sense of wellbeing and social connectedness. This was expressed in the statements from some of the respondents as follows:

“Spending most of our time with our beloved ones who add value to us or appreciate our lives builds confidence in difficult times.” Participant 13

“Spending most of the time with family helps to move away from negative energy which gives hope.” Participant 16

Interactions that are built on good intentions help to motivate people, which resulting in resolving challenges. Healthy interactions are perceived to be a good distraction, which allows single mothers heading families to cope.

○ **Working hard**

Single mothers heading families suggest that working hard helps them to maintain intra- and interpersonal respect. In difficult situations, other people will be able to notice early, where they are overwhelmed and provide help. This was expressed in the following statement:

“I work very hard to keep going and retain personal respect and respect from those around me. When I have problems, relatives and friends realise that it is not laziness but real challenges”. (Participant 14)

“Working hard at work means that I can provide for my family, and that helps keep them happy.” (Participant 4)

Single mothers heading families live a strenuous life as they are always on their toes trying to do their best. They seem to do their best for the benefit of the family, which they are heading, as they are more likely to overcome financial problems. Single mothers heading families measure the happiness of their children through their ability to provide for them.

○ **Coherence**

Single mothers heading families suggest that families tend to find strength in self-reliance and to work through problems rather than giving up. Coherence is another factor that was highlighted by respondents as a contributing factor to their coping. This was expressed by participants as follows:

“We are good at solving problems as a family, with my siblings and parent.” Participant 13

“When facing challenges, we work and solve them together.” Participant 7

Working together as a family seems to help single mothers to share ideas and come up with better solutions. They derive power from a communal approach than being individualistic, especially when facing challenges.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that single mothers heading families use various support structures to help them in managing their challenges.

Findings from the participants indicate that they have endured challenges associated with singlehood up to the date of the study. This seems to support the establishment of a coping mechanism that seems to be significant for their survival. While shifting from primitive techniques to current technology, these mothers have found simple and cost-effective ways. This information can be crucial in developing the public health system in developing countries where professional support may not be adequate and evenly distributed.

Before the 1950s, the most common means of becoming a single-parent family was through the death of a spouse. In contrast, recent data suggests that the majority of families are now formed in the context of separated, divorced, widowed or never-married status (Milan, 2011). There is a paradigm shift, as various factors now lead to a single mother headed family. Before the 1950s, it might be that there was a moral value in marriage, leading to people getting married and working through challenges until one died. The system changed to be more liberal, resulting in separation, divorce, and never marrying being accepted around 2001 with a little resentment. In the current study, economic reasons have led to migrant workers and being single by choice.

This study identified specific factors of family resilience (spirituality, working hard, time spent with other, coherence (FHI), social support (FTRI), and communication. This study support Gardiner and Larocci's (2012) suggestion that when families are faced with adversity, they have specific factors that facilitate their coping. Identification of these factors will help them and other families to deal with similar challenges leading

to coping. It is interesting to note that qualitative study (spirituality, working hard, time spent with others, coherence, social support, and communication) identified more factors than quantitative research. Most of the factors in qualitative data, such as social support and communication, had an insignificant probability when assessing association to family resilience. This difference suggests that these are factors that may be helpful for some single mothers, but all.

The present study found that FHI, which measures the use of family hardiness, which is related to qualitative factors identified as working hard and coherence, were associated with family resilience. Prior research studies and current research have identified FHI as a factor that makes families self-resilient as they depend on their family members to deal with hardships (Mashego and Taruvinga, 2014; McCubbin and McCubbin, 1996). A study by Plumb (2011) among parents of children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) supports this notion by stating that increasing family hardiness reduces stress. Family hardiness and depending on family members help in developing a coherent family unit that allows families to adjust to hardships and work on resolving challenges as a united front (McCubbin and McCubbin, 1996). Increased family hardiness is related to family member accord cohesion, where there are nurturance and avoidance of hostile parental conflict resulting in the family coping (Black & Lobo, 2008). Research focusing on various stressors such as divorce (Mashego and Taruvinga, 2014), ASD (Plumb, 2011) have identified FHI as a factor of family resilience or factor used to cope with hardships.

The present study revealed that single mothers were heading families regards FTRI as a factor of family resilience. FTRI is related to a qualitative factor identified as time spent together and shared activities, was associated with family resilience. The current funding supports black and Lobo (2008) as they state that family time spent conducting daily tasks builds togetherness. They went on to report that shared recreation also builds on a child's social and cognitive skills and adaptability. Time spent together as a family sharing activities with individual family members has developmental benefits for young children. Black and Lobo (2008) found that routines and rituals embedded activities promote close family relationships and maintenance, which may act as a buffer in times of crisis.

Single mothers heading families in this study reported that spirituality, which involves believing in God, praying, and attending church, helped them to cope in times of crisis. Some previous studies by Black and Lobo (2008), Mashego and Taruvinga (2014) teenagers' coping after parental divorce, Brodsky (1999) studying American single mothers, also found that protective factors, including spirituality and shared internal value system, redefines the stressors for them. Spirituality seems to give hope and a better understanding of the stress in a less threatening way. This understanding probably allows calmness leading to the use of better problem-solving skills. In another study, highly spiritual cancer patients report better health than less spiritual people (Jim, Pustejovsky, Park, Danhauer, Sherman, Fitchett, Merluzzi, Munoz, George, Synder, & Salman, 2015).

The present study revealed that communication helped single mothers heading families to cope with hardships. Some previous studies by Walsh (1998) and another by Suryanto and Handoyo (2018) found that open communication processes within a family increase the level of trust and mutual respect. Strong bonds are shared, where there is clarity and open emotional expression, which leads to a collaborative problem-solving approach (Black & Lobo, 2008). Communication leads to shared meaning and combining different ideas that bring the strength of each family member (Walsh, 2010), thus improving the quality and possible effectiveness of the proposed solution (Brommel et al. 2004). In another study among families with individuals affected by schizophrenia, effective communication was found by Rutter et al. (2001) to protect the child from developing maladaptive coping

Single mothers heading families in this study reported that social support, which is made up of support structures such as relatives, friends, church members, and professionals, helps them to cope in times of crisis. A study by Rutter (1987) identified standard support (clergy); however, it also identified different support structures from the current research which include neighbors, teachers, coaches, and other mentors as factors supporting individual resilience. The differences may be due to the uniqueness of people, which can be identified in groups as intragroup differences. Studies by Black and Lobo (2008), Ungar (2005), Walsh (2003), and Cheung and Lui (1997) found social support acting as a stress-buffer. However, a study by Brodsky (1999) identified social support to be a risk factor. These differences suggest the need to treat people as unique while teaching them about support, and professionals should try to identify what will be more likely to work through needs assessment and continued monitoring. Flexibility is needed to adjust to alternative factors when an identified support factor is not fitting of a specific person or group.

These single mothers heading families were coming from families that valued family hardiness and working hard. This might account for the SSI being a statistically insignificant factor of family resilience as the single mothers may have been self-reliant. These findings support studies that found that an increase in self-reliance was associated with a decrease in dependency on support from the community and other (McCubbin

and McCubbin 1996; Walsh 2003; Walters 2009). Social support, such as community forums, has a role in enhancing recovery from various forms of disaster (Walsh, 2007).

The present study revealed that a family's ability to engage in problem-solving and use behavioural strategies when in a crisis did not help single mothers heading families to cope with hardships. The Individual to the Family system, which is how the family manages problems internally amongst family members, might be efficient based on family hardiness (FHI). However, the Family to Social environment may be weak, which is the way the family manages problems outside boundaries, but which still have an influence on the family as a unit. They might not be using their community support structures effectively as their self-reliance may be associated with a decrease in dependency on support from the community (Mc-Cubbin and McCubbin 1996; Walsh 2003; Walters 2009).

The fact that the interviewer was a Shona speaking woman of average age living in the same community may have influenced how the participants responded to the questions. Such a situation presents the need for more research to establish a comparison of the findings with the attitudes and beliefs of single mothers heading families in other parts of the country.

Despite the identified limitations, our findings are an enlightening view of the world of single mothers heading families. They present a conventional coping system similar to the Western perspective by explaining factors that are facilitating their coping in a way that restores dignity concerning uniqueness. Also, single mothers heading families have presented the need to address hardships from a collaborative approach (involving the family as a unity, the community, and professionals).

Study Limitations

A limitation of the study was that the stratum were not representative of the population by race, the small sample size and the study was limited to the urban area which limits generalisation.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that single mothers heading families can identify specific personal and interpersonal factors that can enhance their coping when faced with a crisis. Some factors are distinct and should not be treated as universal when working with single mothers. These factors are more intra-family with some inter-family factors that should be used with care. Policy formulation targeting improved functioning of single mother-headed families should consider recalibrating more resources strengthening the family unit than external support structures. Maintaining the family unit support is cheaper than employing professionals to help individuals since single mothers have significant support within the family unit. Professional interventions with individuals from single-mother headed families should focus on strengthening support from within the family unit more than external sources.

Declarartion

None

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Author contributions

TN proposed the research questions, collected the data which she analysed with PT. Proposal development was guided by PT and also oversee data collection and analysis. The manuscript was drafted by both writers and was then critically read and improved by PT.

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Conflict of Interest

None

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