

Reasons Responsible for the Increase in the Number of Single Mothers in Ludhiana District of Punjab: A Sociological Study

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Abstract:

Family structures worldwide have undergone significant transformation over the past few decades, reflecting broader socio-economic, demographic, and cultural shifts. The normal family is often defined as the immediate group of a father, mother, and children living together. This may be more precisely defined as a nuclear family. The subject of single mothers is related to the fact that today's society is dominated by the idea of the nuclear family in a patriarchal system. One of the most notable developments is the increasing prevalence of single-mother households globally. Traditionally, family systems in many societies, including India, are characterized by stable marital separations and extended family structures. However, contemporary global trends indicate a steady rise in single motherhood due to factors such as divorce, separation, and widowhood. It is hard to understand the horror of the challenges that widows, divorcees, and separated or single parents by choice face every day. This study aims to analyze the reasons behind the rise of single mothers in India, examine socio-economic trends, and evaluate the challenges faced by single mothers.

Keywords: Single Mothers, Headed Households, Family Structure.

Introduction

The family is a fundamental social institution that plays an important role in shaping individuals and societies. Traditionally, most societies around the world are structured in two-parent households, with clearly defined gender roles in which men are responsible for earning income and women are responsible for caregiving. In countries like India, this structure is further reinforced by joint family systems and strong cultural expectations surrounding marriage and family stability. (UN Women, 2019)

However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen deep transformations in family patterns globally. Factors such as urbanization, industrialization, globalization, women's education, and labor force participation have contributed to changes in traditional family structures. As a result, there has been a noticeable increase in diverse family forms, including single-parent households. Globally, family diversity is increasing, with nearly one in ten households now classified as single-parent families, the

majority of which are headed by women. This shift indicates that single motherhood is no longer a bordering phenomenon but a central aspect of modern family systems. (UN Women, 2019)

Single motherhood is a growing global and social phenomenon shaped by demographic, economic, and cultural transformations. Around 13 million households in India are headed by single mothers. Over 71 million single women (widowed, divorced, separated) are recorded in the census of India, and female-headed households are increasing in both rural and urban areas. The increasing number of single mothers is influenced by a combination of demographic, economic, and social factors. (Times of India, 2011)

Specific Reasons Responsible for the Increase in the Number of Single Mothers

Single motherhood has arisen as a significant global social phenomenon over the last few decades, with millions of women heading households independently. According to recent global research, more than 101.3 million households are led by single mothers, reflecting a major transformation in family structures worldwide. In India, the number of single women, including widows, divorced, and separated women, has increased notably between 2001 and 2011, highlighting a stable rise in single motherhood, and these changes are influenced by socio-economic development, urbanization, and evolving gender roles. (Halwiindi, 2024)

- **Rising Divorce Rates**

The increasing rate of divorce is one of the primary reasons behind the growth of single motherhood. Globally, divorce has become more common due to changing expectations from marriage, incompatibility, and reduced tolerance for conflict. Women are now more ready to leave unhappy marriages, leading to a rise in single-parent households. (BMC Psychiatry, 2020)

Divorce rates in India have gradually increased due to changing social attitudes, urbanization, women's education, and financial independence (Mediabird. M, 2024).

- **Rising Widowhood Rates**

Widowhood remains a significant contributor to single motherhood, particularly in developing countries such as India. Many women become single mothers after losing their husbands due to illness, accidents, or other causes. Cultural restrictions often discourage remarriage among widows, leading to long-term single parenting. This factor remains particularly significant in rural and economically weaker sections of society. (Bhatt and Dangwal, 2019)

- **Rising Separation Rates**

Separation without formal divorce is another important cause of single motherhood. In India, many couples choose separation instead of legal divorce due to social stigma and lengthy legal processes. Women in such situations often take full responsibility for raising children alone, and this informal separation significantly contributes to the growing number of single mothers.

(Amato, P. R. 2010)

- **Women's Economic Independence**

The economic empowerment of women has played a central role in increasing single motherhood. With greater access to education and employment opportunities, women are less financially dependent on their husbands. This independence allows women to exit unhappy or abusive marriages and support themselves

and their children. As a result, economic empowerment has indirectly contributed to the rise of single mothers. (Psychiatry, 2020)

- **Urbanization and Modern Lifestyle**

Urbanization has significantly influenced family structures and relationships. The shift from rural to urban living promotes individualism, career location, and changing attitudes toward marriage in urban areas; late marriages and higher stress levels often lead to marital conflicts and separations. These factors collectively contribute to an increase in single motherhood. (Halwiindi, 2024)

- **Changing Social Norms and Acceptance**

Previously, single mothers faced severe stigma and discrimination; however, increasing awareness and education have led to greater acceptance. Media representation and support for women's rights have also contributed to this shift. As stigma drops, more women feel empowered to make independent decisions regarding their lives and families. (PMC, Psychiatry 2024)

- **Domestic Violence and Abuse**

Domestic violence is a critical factor driving women into single motherhood. Many women leave marriages to escape physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Studies indicate that gender inequality and patriarchal norms often perpetuate such violence (Chakravarti, 2023).

- **Male Migration and Desertion**

Male migration for employment often leads to family instability and desertion. In many cases, men migrate to urban areas or abroad and fail to provide financial or emotional support to their families. Desertion is particularly common in rural India, where women are left to manage households independently, and this phenomenon significantly increases the number of single mothers (Bhatt and Dangwal, 2019).

- **Decline of Joint Family System**

The breakdown of the traditional joint family system has also contributed to the rise in single motherhood. Earlier, extended families provided support to widows and separated women, reducing their burden. However, with the shift toward nuclear families, such support systems have weakened, and women are more likely to become independent heads of households. (Dangwal, 2019)

- **Legal Reforms and Women's Rights**

Legal reforms have empowered women to leave oppressive marriages and claim their rights. Laws related to divorce, child custody, and care have improved significantly over time. Increased legal awareness has enabled women to take action against injustice and secure independence, and these developments have contributed to the rising number of single mothers. (Delhi Psychiatry Journal, 2019)

- **Poverty, Economic Stress, and Social Inequality**

Economic hardship plays a significant role in marital instability and single motherhood. Financial stress often leads to conflicts, separation, and leaving. In low-income families, men may desert their families due to instability in providing, leaving women as sole caregivers. Social inequality further worsens these challenges, contributing to the increase in single mothers. (BMC Psychiatry, 2020)

Global Perspective of Single Mothers

Globally, the rise in single motherhood is largely driven by divorce, living-together breakdowns, and changing social norms. Single motherhood has been identified as a challenging role, with disadvantages including financial hardship, poor mental health, and resilience. Resilience is a multidimensional concept, where two conditions need to happen. Resilience may empower single mothers to face the challenges while leading psychologically healthy and productive lives. In this research study, participants were ten West Australian single mothers, aged 35 to 45 years, and a phenomenological methodology was used to understand single mothers' experiences, with information collected through in-depth interviews and the Resilience Scale for Adults, used to complement the qualitative findings as descriptive support. Results suggested that these single mothers faced several challenges; they developed their imagination, resulting in positive adaptation, thus resilience. They believed that resilience is a concept that may empower and provide more control over life, resulting in hope and self-efficacy, and choosing themselves. (Cheeseman, S. 2010)

India Perspective of Single Mothers

One of the most important issues of concern to social welfare workers and policy makers in the developing countries today is the exponential rise in single-parent households. When marriage dissolves because of the death of a husband, divorce, or separation, existing living arrangements change. The risk of being a single-parent head-of-household increases with marital closure. When the husband is the major source of income, marital dissolution increases the possibility of poverty among women head-of-households. In addition to gender, other cultural factors increase the chance of head-of-household status among single women. With marital dissolution, women suffer from a huge loss of social status, as indicated by an increase in female headship. The husband is recognized as the head of the household, and the wife's role as a head of the household is socially objected to. In India, head-of-household status among women brings about several disadvantages. First, the household becomes economically at risk. Households in poverty have very little protection due to the lack of public assistance programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and single mothers face unbelievable challenges in this way. (Swain, 2005)

In Punjab

The number of single mothers in Punjab has increased significantly during recent years because of major social, economic, and cultural changes. One important reason is the rising rate of divorce and marital separation. In the past, women often remained in unhappy marriages because society strongly discouraged divorce. However, with education, urbanization, and women's empowerment, many women are now more aware of their legal rights and personal freedom. Problems such as domestic violence, alcoholism, dowry-related conflicts, lack of emotional support, and family pressure often force women to separate from their husbands and raise children independently. Financial independence among educated women in Punjab has also made it easier for some women to support themselves without depending on men. As a result, the traditional family system is gradually changing, and female-headed households are becoming more common in modern Indian society. (Mishra, P. 2018)

Significance of the Study

The increasing number of single mothers across the world and in India is a significant social issue that reflects major transformations in family structures, cultural values, economic conditions, and women's status in society. Over recent periods, the number of single-mother households has increased progressively due to several interconnected social, economic, demographic, and cultural factors. This phenomenon is not limited to developed countries but is also becoming increasingly visible in developing nations such as India. Modern societies have experienced a shift in attitudes toward marriage, where individuals are less willing to remain in unhappy or abusive relationships. This study is significant in itself as the number of single mothers is increasing worldwide and in India. This is the result of multiple social, economic, cultural and demographic changes. Factors such as divorce, widowhood, domestic violence, migration, poverty, modernization, family conflict, women's empowerment, and changing social norms have all contributed significantly to this growing phenomenon. While the rise in single motherhood reflects progress in women's independence and rights, it also highlights the need for stronger social support systems, economic assistance, legal protection, and societal acceptance to improve the lives of single mothers and their children.

- **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study was to find out the reasons responsible for the increase in the number of single mothers.

Research Methodology

- **Local of the study:** The present study was conducted in Ludhiana District, Punjab, covering selected urban and semi-urban localities to understand respondents' socio-economic, social, and emotional conditions.
- **Selection of the respondents:** The study included 53 respondents, including widowed, divorced, and separated mothers from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds.
- **Tools of Investigation:** Data was collected through the interview schedule method. The study used purposive and snowball sampling to identify the respondents and collected quantitative and qualitative information on their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

REASONS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN LUDIANA DISTRICT OF PUNJAB

Single mothers are women who are raising their children without the regular presence, company, or support of a husband or male partner. Being a single mother means the mother must take primary responsibility for her children's care, upbringing, education, and well-being. Single mothers often manage both household and parenting responsibilities on their own. In this study, single mothers mainly refer to widowed, divorced, and separated mothers residing in Ludhiana district, Punjab. The following are the reasons responsible for the increase in the number of single mothers:

- **Death of the husband:** The death of the husband was the most frequently reported reason for becoming a single mother in the present study. Out of 53 respondents, 24 respondents, that is, 45.3 percent,

reported the death of their husbands as the reason for their single-mother status. This study indicates that widowhood was the major pathway through which women became single mothers in the study population. The death of a husband could bring a sudden change in the structure and functioning of a family. When the husband is the main income earner, his death may create immediate economic difficulties for the wife and children. The woman may suddenly become responsible for household expenses, children's education, healthcare, food, housing, and other basic needs. Thus, widowhood can change the economic and social position of women within the family. The respondents' experiences also indicated that the death of a husband was not only an economic problem but also an emotional and social experience. A woman may experience sorrow, loneliness, insecurity, and increased responsibility after the death of her husband, and at the same time, she may have to continue performing her role as a mother and caregiver. This creates a situation in which emotional adjustment and practical responsibilities have to be managed together. The findings showed the importance of family and community support for widowed mothers. From a sociological point of view, widowhood demonstrates how changes in family composition could influence the social and economic life of women and children. The death of a husband is an unavoidable event, but its consequences may be different depending on the woman's education, employment, economic resources, family relationships, and social support. Therefore, widowhood should be understood not only as a personal loss but also as a change in family structure that can create new social and economic responsibilities for women.

- **Betrayal and dishonesty:** Betrayal and dishonesty arose as the second most commonly reported reason for becoming a single mother. 12 respondents, which is 22.6 percent, reported betrayal and dishonesty as the reason for their single-mother status. This finding suggested that problems related to trust, honesty, commitment, and communication played an important role in the marital experiences of a considerable number of respondents. Marriage is generally based on trust, emotional security, mutual respect, communication, and shared responsibilities. When one partner repeatedly behaves dishonestly or breaks the trust of the other partner, the relationship may become emotionally difficult. Betrayal can create feelings of disappointment, insecurity, anger, sadness, and loss of trust. When such problems continue for a long period, they may weaken the marital relationship. The respondents' experiences suggested that betrayal and dishonesty may also affect the sense of security within the family. A woman who feels that she cannot trust her husband may experience emotional stress and uncertainty about the future of the marriage. From a sociological perspective, trust is an important part of social relationships. Marriage involves not only emotional attachment but also expectations about responsibilities, loyalty, care, and mutual support. When these expectations are not fulfilled, the relationship may experience conflict and instability. The findings indicated that women may increasingly expect honesty, respect, and emotional security within marriage. Women may be less ready to continue relationships in which they experience repeated betrayal or lack of respect. However, the decision to leave a marriage is also influenced by economic resources, children's needs, family pressure, and availability of social support. Thus, betrayal and dishonesty are not simply personal problems between two people, and they can affect family relationships, emotional well-being, parenting responsibilities, and the stability of the household. The

findings highlighted the importance of trust, communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility in maintaining healthy marital relationships.

- **Incompatibility and unhappy marriage:** Incompatibility and an unhappy marriage were reported by 8 respondents, that is, 15.1 percent, as a reason for becoming single mothers. This part indicated that difficulties in maintaining a satisfactory and harmonious marital relationship contributed to single motherhood for a notable number of women. Marital incompatibility may develop because of differences in values, attitudes, expectations, personalities, communication styles, financial priorities, family responsibilities, and approaches to raising children. An unhappy marriage may also develop when there is a lack of emotional support, communication, companionship, or mutual understanding between partners. A woman may continue living in the marriage for many years because of family expectations, social pressure, children's needs, economic dependence, or the belief that marriage should be maintained despite difficulties. From a sociological perspective, marriage is an institution in which individuals are expected to perform different social roles. Husbands and wives may have different expectations regarding household work, childcare, employment, finances, and relationships with extended family members. When partners have different expectations and are unable to transfer their roles, conflict may develop. The findings therefore suggested that an unhappy marriage should not be understood only as a private matter between spouses. It can be connected with extensive social expectations about marriage, gender roles, family responsibilities, and women's position within the household. When marital dissatisfaction continues for a long time, it may affect the emotional well-being of both partners and children, and at the same time, separation may also create new challenges because the family structure changes and the mother may have to take greater responsibility for childcare and household expenses. In this study, the findings highlighted the importance of communication, mutual understanding, equality, and shared responsibilities within marriage. They also showed that women's experiences of marriage are influenced by both personal relationships and the wider social environment in which those relationships exist.

- **Domestic violence and disrespect:** Domestic violence and disrespect were reported as reasons for becoming single mothers by 5 respondents, that is, 9.4 percent. Although this number was lower than the shared reporting of death of the husband, betrayal and dishonesty, incompatibility, and an unhappy marriage, it remains an important finding because violence and disrespect can have serious consequences for women and children. Domestic violence can take different forms, including physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic forms of abuse. Such experiences can create an environment of fear, insecurity, stress, and instability within the household, and repeated disrespect may also reduce a woman's sense of dignity and emotional security. From a sociological perspective, domestic violence can be related to unequal power relations within the family. Traditional gender expectations may sometimes give greater decision-making power to men while placing greater responsibility for household and childcare work on women. When power is unequal, women may experience difficulties in expressing their needs or making independent decisions. Disrespect within marriage can also affect the quality of family relationships. A healthy family environment requires communication, dignity, cooperation, and mutual respect, and when these values are absent, marital relationships may become unstable, and children may also be affected when they observe conflict, violence, or disrespect between their parents. Domestic violence and

disrespect therefore need to be understood as both family and social issues. Their effects may extend beyond the husband and wife and influence children's development, family relationships, economic conditions, and the overall well-being of the household.

- **Substance abuse and irresponsibility:** Substance abuse and irresponsibility were reported by 4 respondents, which is 7.5 percent, as other reasons for becoming single mothers. Although fewer respondents reported this factor, it remains socially important because substance abuse and irresponsible behavior can affect family functioning, economic security, parenting, and marital stability. Substance abuse may influence the behavior and responsibilities of a person within the family. When a husband has a substance-use problem, household income may be spent on substances rather than on food, children's education, healthcare, housing, or other family needs, and this can create financial pressure for the household and increase the responsibilities of the mother. Irresponsible behavior may also include failure to provide financial support, lack of involvement in childcare, neglect of family responsibilities, or refusal to participate in household decision-making. When these behaviors continue over time, the burden of family responsibilities may increasingly fall on the woman. The effects of substance abuse may also be emotional and social. When one member is unable or unwilling to perform expected responsibilities, the functioning of the family may become difficult. However, substance abuse should not be considered only as an individual problem, and it can also be connected with the social environment, economic difficulties, peer influence, family conditions, and access to treatment and support services.

Conclusion

The study highlighted several wider sociological factors that influence the experiences of single mothers. Economic insecurity, limited employment opportunities, educational differences, changing gender roles, family support, social stigma, childcare responsibilities, and access to welfare services are important factors in the lives of single mothers. Single motherhood is a complex social and family issue that develops through different personal, marital, and social circumstances. The findings of the study showed that the most common reason for becoming a single mother was the death of the husband. This indicates that widowhood is an important pathway to single motherhood in the study population. Other major factors included betrayal, dishonesty, marital incompatibility, unhappy marital relationships, domestic violence, disrespect, substance abuse, and the irresponsible behavior of husbands, which also affected marital stability and contributed to the breakdown of family relationships. The findings suggested that single motherhood can result from both unavoidable circumstances, such as widowhood, and difficulties within marital relationships. From a sociological perspective, the findings showed that single motherhood is not only an individual or family issue but is also connected with wider social and economic conditions. Social support systems and creating greater opportunities for women's economic independence can help single mothers manage the challenges associated with changes in family structure.

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