



## **‘My Dreams Were Buried With My Father’: Navigating Socio-Economic and Psychological Challenges and Coping Strategies of Single Parented Students**

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<b>ARTICLE INFO</b>	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
<b>Keywords:</b> Single parent households, Family structure, Academic performance, Educational challenges, Single parented students	Literature suggests that single parent households promote growing concern about how the family structure influence students’ academic performance. The present study was aimed at exploring and identifying the challenges and experiences of single parented students in Lahore. The qualitative data for the present study was collected from 14 participants of Government College University, Lahore who were single parented students. The participants of this study highlighted their educational challenges and experiences and how it affected their academic performance. The study findings indicated various challenges faced by single parented students. It was found that single parented students had quite different experiences in terms of difficulties faced by them as compared to students having both parents. Single parented students reported to had financial, social, psychological and emotional challenges and negative experiences like social stigmatization and bullying at different levels. However, the participants reported that they were able to deal with these challenges by adopting coping strategies such as involvement in sports activities, reading books, and doing part time jobs.
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Family is an important agent of socialization and parents play very crucial role in child development by providing love, warmth and affection and raise a child according to the requirements and expectations of society but if this does not happen and a child is raised by single parent then child’s overall personality will get affected as he has not received affection and guidance from both parents (Seemi et al., 2022). Highest number of single parents around the globe are found in United States (23%) and United Kingdom (21%) and worldwide 6.8% of children on average live in single parent households with single mothers comprising majority of

average 84.3% and 15.7% are lone- father households. As compared to few past decades where rise in single parenting was seen due to the death of one of spouse but many others reasons like divorce between parents, unplanned pregnancy or adoption can be seen as emerging factors in some recent years (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023).

During the last two to three decades drastic demographic changes had occurred in Pakistan especially divorced rate increased and also natural death of one of the parent cannot be neglected. During the last fifteen years number of widows increased from 3616 in 2005-06 to 16190 in 2014-15 to 25482 in 2019-2020. There were 212 divorced persons in 2005-06 while number increased to 923 persons in 2014-15 which according to latest data reached to 2193 in 2019-20. Children whose parents are divorced or separated get affected differently in their child's socio-economic development and overall personality as compared to the widow parent (Aleem et al., 2021). In traditional family structure like Pakistan male dominates the family and is responsible for decision making and bear all expenses. As females are dependent on male in all matters of life and when male spouse is absent it will had more parenting problems as females are unable to provide nurturing like their male counterparts. In this case family will face more poverty and economic stress as females are unable to support the financial needs of a child and due to which children are dropped out of schools and do not perform well in their academia( Aleem et al., 2021).

Those children who are raised by single mothers having low socio economic status show lower level of success in their academia as compared to other students who come from father led families as their father will support them financially and meet their needs well. The role of instructors is very important towards these types of students and should be sympathetic towards them (Sultan & Kanwal, 2013). The adolescents constitute 64% of the total population of Pakistan. When a child is brought up in the absence of one parent due to death or divorce of one of the parent then a child gets neglected and his developmental needs are ignored due to which he adopt delinquent behavior (Liaquat et al., 2024).

When child gets love and affection from both parents he will become a successful member of the society as he knows who to live and fit within society with all needs fulfilled. But those children who belong to broken family had internal conflict and struggle in their life. The child will blame family for distress and his inability to solve problems. Divorce is also one of the major reasons of trouble and trauma in the last few years at any age, child faces pain and depression when he see his parents being getting separated (Usakli, 2018). Single parenting disturbs emotional well-being of a child and most of the children do not like living in single parented family. These students get involved in commercial activities to meet their needs and are less privileged in receiving parental care which ultimately worsen their academic performance (Ntumi et al., 2016).

In separated and divorced families there is high risk of depression, rebelliousness and suicide rate among children as compared to families having both parents. These adolescents develop more behavioral and psychological issues and are unable to develop healthy relationships with others because their relationship with their own parent is not healthy. Due to lack of supervision and disturbance in the family a child is not able to handle social situations and other affairs properly (Zahid & Sultana, 2021). Single parents due to their busy schedule are not able to give much time, care and attention to their children which affects the overall wellbeing of a child. As single parents give less attention and time to children and do not provide help and guidance in their assignments and homework due to which child's academic

performance gets affected and they do not perform well in studies or sometimes they quit (Ali & Soomar, 2019).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Amato et al., (2015) evaluated the performance in mathematics and reading skills of those who live with the single parent family. They aim to focus that is there any effect of single parent family structure on the educational achievement of child. They found a decline in the children's test score and also mentioned that rise in family structure is not genetic rather it is a structural factor which also affects mental health and cognitive ability of children.

Mrinde (2014) revealed that students from single parent family face many challenges which include economic hardship which becomes a great challenge to educational attainment of a child. Due to poverty and lack of resources children are unable to attend school as they lack money to pay fees and other stationary items. These students get involved in child labor and are not able to attend classes, so do not perform well in their academia. Due to focus on making money and to earn living they lose concentration on study and get dropped out of school. A study by (Perera, 2022) claimed that students from single parent household show below than average attendance in school which is mainly due to less attention by their teachers and poor relationships with parents as well. These students consider themselves inferior to other in school and do not receive help from their class fellows as they do not make bonds with them and remain isolated due to their psychological disturbances. If these students instead of receiving low parental involvement and less attention from teachers get support and help from them, then these students will show desirable academic performances. ). Single parenting disturbs emotional well-being of a child and most of the children do not like living in single parent family. These students get involved in commercial activities to meet their needs and are less privileged in receiving parental care which ultimately worsen their academic performance (Ntumi et al., 2016).

Bago (2022) suggested that single parents due to having double responsibilities lack time for follow up of their children due to whom their child gets involved in criminal activities and use of drugs. These children use drugs and smoke cigarettes as they want to relieve and try to forget their problems and to avoid stress and anxiety. Single parent children due to lack of receiving good balanced diet are more vulnerable to diseases. In order to compensate the love of missed parents a child gets involved in sexual activities of the opposite gender due to which they get health issues like HIV/AIDS. Due to these mentioned problems single parent students show poor academic performance like low grades and unable to complete their years of schooling which ultimately increases illiteracy rate and continue the cycle of poverty among them. The literature suggests that adolescents living within single parent family had become independent, early mature and responsible but on the other hand had received less nurturing, had less time to play and do their school work. These children think themselves their contribution important in the household and also know that they had to look after themselves as their parents had busy schedule. These adolescents had more autonomy and can grow but they also regret not having traditional family structure like their other age fellows (Weiss, 1979). However it is also revealed that as single parent students are mature enough that they can adapt to the changing lifestyle and circumstances and also vary less significantly in their educational achievements as compared to both parent children (Yaw, 2016).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative research approach using purposive sampling technique. In this study in-depth interviews were conducted to deeply understand the phenomena. This study was conducted with the students at the Government College University, Lahore. The students who were currently studying in GC University were selected because the researcher interacted with these students during university life, so these students were known to researcher.

Following the purposive sampling, total 14 participants including both male and female in equal ratio were interviewed for this study. After conducting 12 interviews researcher reached saturation point. Further, two more interviews were conducted to verify themes that were originated in already conducted interviews. A semi structured interview guide was developed as a tool for data collection after extensive literature review on the challenges and experiences of single parented students. The focus of this study revolves around the phenomenological approach because researcher wanted to investigate in detail and explore the lived experiences of participants.

## **FINDINGS**

After analysis following themes was identified from the data that was gathered during the in-depth interviews. These themes are as followed:

### **Financial crunch**

The participants were experiencing financial problems like they did not had reliable or balanced source of income to continue their education, due to which they were not able to pay their college or university fees on time. Apart from this, they had to stay away from education for some time due to lack of resources and financial support. As economic conditions were unstable so students had to leave their education and work as a laborer to support family and meet educational expenses. These students were not able to choose expensive institution and also had little choice in the selection of subjects.

#### **One of the participants narrated:**

“The major challenge for me to get education was financial support. I take an academic gap of almost two years due to lack of financial resources. During this gap, I worked in various shops for two years after matriculation and had supported my sister and brother in their educational expenses and also made money for my higher education.”

#### **Similarly another participant said:**

“Yes! Due to lack of resources I was not able to study in the department/ subject which I wanted or could go in. I wanted to do engineering and I qualified for it. Even I got admission in a private engineering college but could not study there due to lack of educational expenditures. My dreams were buried with my father.”

#### **Another participant explained:**

“If my father would be alive there was a possibility that I might be doing some other degree which I dreamt of because of the high financial cost I didn’t opt that field just not to be a burden on my family.”

### **Health problems**

#### *Psychological and emotional issues*

The separation of the parents or the death of one of them had a profound effect on the health of children which affected their educational attainment. Psychological issues like depression, loneliness and anxiety was seen among these students. It was also found that due to emotional disorder students were not able to go to school and take gap from study to come out of this trauma.

**One of the participants said:**

“I can feel negativity which includes stress, pressure of multitasking, and pressure of doing everything single handedly. I am eldest daughter so I have extra pressure of being a breadwinner. So, depression phase comes and goes, sometimes I feel hopelessness because of unavailability of family support.”

**Similarly another participant said:**

“I faced sadness because I was too much attached to my father due to this I quit my studies for almost 2 years and this gap in my studies is due to my unstable mental condition.”

***Physical health issues***

During the interviews, the participants also discussed about their physical health as well and expressed that they faced many health issues and illness when they experienced the trauma of separation or death of one of their parents.

**A participant described:**

“When my mother died, I fell ill for months and did not receive proper medication. I also had typhoid fever and was away from school for a while.”

**Social stigmatization**

The participants expressed that they experienced social stigmatization in different ways as a single parented student in educational institutions. These students were taunted and experienced a sense of inferiority for being single parented children from other fellows at times. They faced shame and a sense of inferiority from other fellows. They were considered not normal and different from both parented children in their surroundings which affected their mental health and also academic performance.

**A participant said:**

“I am bullied that my mother doesn’t give me enough time because she earns for us. I am told to by relatives to get married so that my mother’s burden is minimized.”

**Another participant explained:**

“When I applied for scholarship in my university and my name was present in list of scholarship for orphans. One of my fellows asked me in a derogatory way that you are an orphan and are you not able to pay your university fees and applied for scholarship. I thought that one of my class fellow asked me and now he knows about it, so I got worried that he might tell other class fellows and may be other fellows will ask me and generate other rumors that afraid me in any way.”

**Similarly another narrated:**

“I had some relatives who look down on us and consider us as a strange creature. These relatives are mainly from my father's side that does not have a good relationship with us. Many times I had heard them describe my mother as unfortunate for my father.”

**Poor academic performance**

The participants explained that when they were supposed to live with the single parent their grades decline and their attention towards studies become less. It was also noted that due to the absence of father especially in girls there was a lack of confidence and they participated less in class discussions which also affected their academic performance.

**A participant said:**

“My experiences in terms of education are not good because after my father's death my education was interrupted for a while and also I faced hesitation in interacting with male teachers.”

**Another participant explained:**

“When we were living with our aunt for some time before living with our father, at that time there was a decline in my grades. There was no proper privacy and room for us to study as we had in our own home and there were kids in our aunt’s house due to which I was not able to concentrate on my studies.”

**High rate of absenteeism**

The participants explained that due to absence of one of parents especially father there was a burden of household chores and responsibilities on them as well which demands to take time off from the university which also affected regularity in university and attendance ratio.

**The participant said:**

“Being the elder male person in my house, I also had to take leaves as I am doing a job due to which I hardly manage my attendance in my university and my attendance gets short but some teachers support me in this matter sometimes.”

**Coping strategies**

The participants had discussed about the coping mechanisms they adopted in the difficult times in order to keep themselves away from negative thoughts and to continue their studies as well. They adopted some strategies like reading books, playing physical games and doing part time jobs. More male participants were seen involved more in doing part time jobs to fulfill educational expenses. Female participants mostly stayed at home and get themselves busy in activities like reading books to feel less stress.

**A participant narrated:**

“Whenever I feel stressed, I go out to the park with my friends and spend my time playing there to reduce my stress. Spending my time outside home with friends and playing games relieves me and relaxes my mind.”

**A participant said:**

“I am very fond of reading books, I try to spend maximum time in reading books so that I don't may overcome side challenges like stress, depression, anxiety, etc. so I try to keep myself busy. This method has been very beneficial for me.”

**Similarly another participant said:**

“Whenever I feel mentally restless, I start reading books. I read books anyway. I find solace in reading the ideas of various thinkers to overcome this restlessness. Also, I am very fond of reading Arab history; I had kept many books at home and keep reading them and keep myself busy in order to better my mood.”

**One of the participants narrated:**

“Once the department asked to set up stalls in the university, so I took my painting to sell and I got quite a good response because many of my paintings were sold. I was inspired by this and started it for my part-time job. I started promoting my paintings on social media; I got good response there too. Thus, by selling these paintings I earn and pay my educational expenses.”

**Another participant said:**

“As I told you I am working at a call center at night time and the salary I receive helps me a lot to meet my educational expenses. I also financially support my family and siblings.”

**DISCUSSION**

Single parents lack economic resources and face poverty so due to economic stress parents are not able to spend much on the education of their children. Along with household

chores single parents do jobs to meet the needs of children but due to lack of attention and time, a child feels loneliness and stress which negatively impacts child's academic performance.

Findings of this study had explored that single parented students had low self-esteem, anxiety and depression and limited emotional support. Due to these issues and lack of moral and emotional support, a child's personal development and well-being gets affected. These students had behavioral issues and are not able to build healthy social relationships. A study by (Alami et al., 2014) showed that orphan children whose family is supported by widow mother had low self-esteem and affect their development as they face the stigma of absence of father.

A child from single parented family faces health problems as single parents are not able to spend much on child's health and due to living with bad health conditions these children are not be able to perform extraordinary in education as compared to other students from intact families. Disadvantaged physical environment and low socio economic status of single mothers contribute to the adverse health condition of their children (Scharte & Bolte, 2013).

Also, data explored that gender disparities also exist where male participants face more stigmas and pressure of responsibilities as compared to female participants because of more social interaction more people know about their single parenting. The findings of current study also showed that single parented students were bullied and embarrassed at school. It confirms the findings by (Edrogon et al., 2023) that single parented students are low in emotional well-being and are victims of bullying. Schools should promote healthy family relationship and prevention of valance in schools.

The research findings revealed that to deal with bad experiences and challenges, single parented students had adopted some strategies. For instance, male participants had started part time job to meet the financial needs. Study revealed that single parented students took loans and were not even able to pay back after the completion of their studies (Miller, 2012). These students also got involved in physical sports to come out of depression and stress. Female participants were involved in reading books but there were some female participants who also started part time job to meet the financial needs and to support their family.

## CONCLUSION

The current study revealed that students from single-parent families face multifaceted challenges and have different educational experiences compared to those from intact families. They are generally unable to perform as well academically as their peers because they encounter more hardships and demanding life circumstances. Their educational journeys differ significantly from students in dual-parent households, as single-parented students often face financial, emotional, social, and academic pressures. They also experience a lack of supervision and parental support necessary for academic success, while bearing additional responsibilities marked by struggle and stress. However, the study also demonstrated that a significant number of these students show strong determination to succeed. Many adapt to their circumstances, work hard to manage both responsibilities and academics, and develop strategies to cope with challenges in order to continue their studies.

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