

## **Single parenting in Nigeria: Psycho-social implications.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is a review of existing literature on single-parenting as a form of a fast emerging family pattern that was formerly not known and accepted in Nigeria, and is now gaining recognition and being adopted in our society. The paper examined various definitions of the concept and causes of single parenting such as death of a spouse, divorce, early age of marriage, teenage pregnancy/ unintended pregnancy, desertion, single parent adoption, industrialization and women empowerment are discussed. Displaced homemakers, adolescent mothers, single fathers and voluntary motherhood are some of the types of single parenthoods identified and discussed. Single parenting though gaining grounds are not without their attendant negative consequences on the children and parents alike. Some of these psychosocial implications on the children include anti-social behaviours, aggression, poor academic performance, fear, anxiety, hostility and idleness. While some of the psychosocial implications on single parents include, discrimination, rejection and blackmail, condemnation, stress, insecurity, loneliness, role identity and depression. Couples in a marriage should endeavour to settle their grievances and conflicts amicably to avoid single parenting are some of the recommendations made.*

**Keywords:** Family, Single-Parenting, Single-Parenthood, Psychosocial Implications.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Single Parenting and its implications cannot be considered outside the scope of the ideal family unit. The family is the basic unit and bedrock of the society, and the most important agent of socialization for children. Socialization of the children is very important for the continuity of any culture or society (Olaleye & Oladeji, 2010). The family is the first primary social group that the child belongs to and comes in contact with. The family has a great influence on the physical, psychological, social, mental and moral development of the child. The Nigerian family comprises of the father, mother, children and other family members (uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, etc). The family could be the nuclear or extended family setting.

In an ideal family setting, the parents who are the major stakeholders are saddled with the responsibility for providing proper upbringing and development of the children in all areas of life. Parents have important roles to play in ensuring that children acquire proper and appropriate social, psychological, emotional, religious, moral and academic development. In addition to the roles and responsibilities of the parents, other family members also are stakeholders in child upbringing and development.

In Nigeria, parental roles determine development of the children. Paternal roles are those of providing finances, educational materials and child discipline, while

maternal roles are those of childcare and homemaking. Despite the individual traditional roles determined by the society for parents, parents do play complementary roles by taking up the role of the other whenever necessary, supervising, monitoring and spending quality time with the children. The entire family (parents, children and extended family members) all have the role of ensuring that the children are brought up in the norms and values of the society; thereby ensuring the psychological and emotional welfare of the child/children (Azuka-Obieke, 2013).

Any laxity on the part of the parent in the performance of their roles will result in backwardness and maladaptive behaviours. Therefore, parenthood is a responsibility requiring the full cooperation of both parents who must ensure the total development of their children. In this light it is obvious that the roles of both parents in the total development of the children cannot be over emphasised.

As normal/ideal parenting is taking place in an ideal family setting, there are situations and circumstances that could disrupt this process such as divorce and separation of various kinds that could lead to single parenting; this leads us to definition of concepts that will be featuring in this discuss.

### **Definition of concepts**

Single Parenting has been defined in

various ways and by varied authors, however the ideas are the same and having similar meanings. Some of these definitions are here considered:

**Single-parenting** is a situation in which one of the two individuals involved in the conception of the child is solely responsible for the upbringing of the child (Ham, 2004). Similarly, Wikipedia (2014) defines single-parenting, as a situation where a parent who is not living with the spouse or partner has most of the day-to-day responsibility in raising the child or children.

Ortese (1998) explains that single-parenthood may arise when either the male or female decides to produce and rear a child /children outside wedlock. A single parent is therefore a parent not living with a spouse that has most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising the child / children (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). In the same vein, Igba (2006) sees a single-parent family as a nuclear family where one or more children are nurtured by either a father or mother, and is referred to as a father/mother headed family. In such situation, the remaining parent not only inherits the responsibility of the missing parent, but also takes custody of their children, in addition to his/her roles as father / mother (Sanchez, 2007; Ezeigbo, 2001). Single parenting is also known as Solo parenting and a single parent a solo parent.

For, decades and even centuries, single parenting has been a major issue of concern to persons, groups and nations that are conservatives; even at that single-parenting is already becoming a fast and rapidly growing trend in the society. Nowadays single-parent families have become even more common and fashionable than the so-called “nuclear families” (Tenibiaje & Tenibiaje, 2011).

Formerly in Nigeria, single parenting was unheard of and not known. When it existed it was regarded as an exceptional case, ignored and frowned at. Single parentings are fast growing family patterns both inside and outside Nigeria (Nwachukwu, 1998). The aggressive influence of western culture and lifestyle has impacted so much on traditional family values in Nigeria. Coupled with increasing socioeconomic demands on traditional family life and the attendant social complexities that have worked to erode strong positive family values associated with traditional Nigerian families thereby making single parenting now socially acceptable in our society, with its attendant negative consequences (Azuka-Obieke, 2013).

There are really no available statistics of single parent families in Nigeria, but practical experiences, empirical studies, behavioural studies of school children and delinquent children from such homes, practical experiences and newspaper reports shows us that there is an increase in

single parent homes (Azuka-Obieke, 2013) in Nigeria. Single parenthood is a fast growing primal global social trend, also affecting Nigeria and becoming a norm rather than an anomaly (Adelani & Ogunbanwo, 2008).

Women are more involved in single parenting, since custody of the child is usually granted to the mothers. One parent family affects the parent/children because the responsibility that are supposed to be shared by both parents is solely upon a single individual making life more demanding and challenging and if not well managed, it might lead to maladjustment in life (Amato, 1996).

#### **Characteristics of Single Parenting**

From the definitions of single parenting considered above, the following characteristics of single parenting have been deduced:-

- i. Two persons a man and woman are involved in a relationship that has resulted in the conception of a child or children.
- ii. The parents no longer live together.
- iii. The child/children are living with only one of the parents.
- iv. Only one of the parents is saddled with the daily responsibility of the upbringing of the child/children.

#### **Causes of Single Parenting / Parents**

There are varying ways in which single parent families are created, some which

have been documented include the following:-

- i. **Death of a spouse-** Historically, this is one of the major causes of single parenting (deVaus, 2004). This is a situation where one of the parents dies leaving the other parent with the sole responsibility of caring and providing for the children. These deaths could result from wars (such as inter and intra communal crisis, religious and ethnic conflicts), maternal mortality, illnesses (such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, etc), accidents (road/ automobile, air crashes, domestic and industrial).
- ii. **Divorce-** This is another major cause of single parenting, where the spouses / partners in a marriage or relationship are no longer satisfied with the quality of their relationship which has produced children and thereby decide to end the relationship thereby leading to a divorce. Divorce rates have increased significantly in recent years with a third of marriages now ending in divorce leading to single parenthood (Lawal & Adediran, 2007). High divorce rates means more singles and people who have experienced divorce in their families have more negative attitude about marriage and more positive attitude to single parenthood( Adelani and Ogunbanwo, 2008)

- iii. **An early age at first marriage** is associated with a higher probability of divorce and separation (Single and Samara, 1996).
- iv. **Changing views of single parenthood** by the society, which is now being viewed as a legitimate and alternative to marriage (Adelani and Ogunbanwo, 2008). Such as, many marriageable young women who have gone through bruises of premarital relationships decide to be single mothers, and single parenthood being seen as a reality now in Nigeria (Essien & Bassey, 2012).
- v. **Teenage Pregnancy / Unintended Pregnancy**-Essien and Bassey (2012), identified this as a cause of single-parenting in Nigeria. Here, the teenage girl who is young and inexperienced is being lured into a sexual relationship. Ignorant of the consequences of her action and unaware of negotiating safe sex she gets pregnant, the man responsible usually denies and abandons her leaving her to face the consequences of their action there by leaving her with the burden of carrying the pregnancy and assuming full responsibility of the child.  
  
In Nigeria, the case of unwanted / teenage pregnancy became rampant and assumed an alarming dimension in the mid 1980s. A number of  
  
needless deaths attended this development due to abortions and misuse of contraceptives. This practice was prevalent among teenagers and youths who were by far not prepared either psychologically or occupationally for starting a family. Oftentimes, these pregnancies resulted in the birth of children outside wedlock with the children raised outside wedlock, and the children growing up to know the mother as the only parent (Elegbeleye & Akoda, 2001).
- vi. **Desertion**- This is another cause of single parenthood in Nigeria, it is a common trend that has recently crawled into our society, and men tend to abandon their families thereby leaving the mothers to take sole responsibility of the children. Desertion is also known as 'poor man divorce' Kendall (2003) without going through legal process of divorce. Either the father or mother walks away from the marriage. Children of deserted parents find it difficult to understand the reasons why they have to do without the other parent (Olaleye & Oladeji, 2010). These children see themselves as unloved and unwanted by the deserted parents or some put the blame of the available parents as it is their fault for the abscond parent's desertion (Santrock, 2002).
- vii. **Industrialization**- This factor as a

cause of single –parenting has been discussed and documented by Macionis (1997). He argued that industrialization has brought about most of the changes experienced in the society, which is also evident in the changes experienced in our families. He further explains that, quality parenting is an expensive lifetime commitment that requires the attention of the parents involved. Hence, economically, industrialization is said to transform children from a vital asset to a burdensome liability and, for that reason, to encourage women to become educated and to join the work force. For a woman entering the work force has only strengthened women's financial capacity to be single parents.

**viii. Money and Education**—According to Essien and Bassey (2012) these factors have contributed to increased single motherhood, in the sense that where the woman has so much money, she finds it difficult to come down and stay under a man and wonder why she should answer 'sir' to a man when she can fend for herself. However, there have been cases of women who submitted to their men despite their wealth. Corroborating these, Obot (2011) maintains that women empowerment in whatever form educational, economic or both has increased single motherhood all

over the world.

Other causes of single parenting include: husband imprisonment, single-parent adoption, rape, emigrant spouses who travel out of the country leaving their spouses alone usually women to care for the children all alone (Dokpesi, 2013). Similarly, Olaleye and Oladeji (2010), documents that husbands have gone away to work in towns of countries across the border thereby leaving the responsibility of caring for the children to the wife invariably making her a single parent. Other causes documented by Adelani and Ogunbanwo (2008) are adultery, cruelty, desertion, addiction to alcohol or drugs, husband imprisonment and death of husband. Similarly, other causes documented include violent crises, rape and sexual harassment, poverty, economic instability, and social movement are contributing factors to single parenthood (Olaleye & Oladeji, 2010).

#### **Types of single-parenting**

There are different types of single-parenthoods, some that have been documented are considered here. Burge (1997) observed that the vast majority of single parent families are low income families consisting of a mother and her young children and are characterised by a high percentage of minority representation and relatively little formal education. Burge (1997) identified three major sub groups of one-parent families which are the following:-

**-Displaced homemakers** (Divorced) which is as a result of breakdown of relationship between couples.

**-Adolescent mothers-** This kind of single parenthood comes about as a result of an adolescent/teenage girl becoming pregnant through pre-marital sexual relationships, rape, etc and having to take responsibility of the child all by herself.

**-Single fathers-** This kind of single parenthood can be created as a result of death of the mother, desertion of father and children by the mother, man who impregnates a girl and is not ready to marry then collects the child and decides to take responsibility of the child all by himself.

**-Single mothers-** Essien and Bassey (2012) identified types of single mothers which include, *voluntary single mothers* (women who are neither married nor divorced chose to have and raise children on their own), *involuntary single mothers* (women who never chose to have children but have found themselves in that situation such as through death of spouse, divorce, rape, etc.), *women who though married and living with their husbands are shouldering the responsibility of both parents including sole breadwinner ship* ; and *women who have joint legal or non-legal custody of the children with the father.*

### **Psycho-Social Implications of Single-Parenting**

The experience of single-parenting has been documented by researchers to have a number of implications on both the child/children and parents.

#### **Psycho-social implication of single-parenting on the child / children**

Single-Parenting has effect on the cognitive, emotional and social development of the children (Mabuza, Thwala & Okeke, 2014).

Harrison-Hale, McLoyd and Smedley (2004), documents that single parents spend less time with their children thereby less time monitoring and supervising them, communicating less with the children about their needs, thereby the children being unhappy and insecure these subsequently leads to displays of risky and maladaptive behaviours such as: smoking, drinking of alcohol, delinquency, violence, unsafe sexual activity and suicide attempts as noted by Symeon (2007). Similarly, Levitin (1999) observed and documented psychological implications of single-parenting on children from such families as delinquency, failing in school, developing inappropriate sex role attitude and behaviours.

Children from broken homes are usually associated with anti-social behaviours, poor academic records, rebellion, idleness, drug and substance abuse as documented by

Salami (1998) and Agbo (1997). They have low self-esteem, poor academic and school achievement and psychological adjustment (Hyunjoon, 2008 & Azuka-Obieke, 2013).

Children from single-parent homes are commonly described as more hostile, aggressive, anxious, fearful, hyperactive and distractible (Nwachukwu, 2006), their social behaviour is impaired, sometimes intimidated and dull during social gatherings (Uzochukwu, 2015) life in the single parent family can be stressful for the child (Uwaifo, 2012).

Meeker (2011), is of the view that children form their identity around the cues they get from both their father and mother. In a single mother home, the children have an ingrained (usually subconscious) need to know their father and why he is not with them. Cues from mothers alone leave void about who the children are from a male perspective. At times, children innocently in their own way, but very unfortunately, and until their brains have developed more fully, blame themselves for their father's absence, leading to self-crushing sadness, depression, disappointment and anger.

Egbochuku and Oliha (2014) observed truant behaviour in children from single-parent homes, as a psychological implication on the children.

Children from single-parent homes are usually discriminated upon and

stigmatized, they experience feelings of rejection and actually being ridiculed by friends and other children, are lonely, have higher rates of absenteeism at school, lower level of education, higher dropout rates mostly with boys; and more delinquent activity, alcohol and drug addiction (Keswet & Dapas, 2010).

### **Psycho-social implication of single-parenting on parents**

Caring for the needs of children by two parents is not an easy task, taking up that responsibility by one parent is an even greater task. Taking up the role of two parents has been empirically documented to have some consequences on the parents. Myers has this view, that parenting is a hard task, single parenting (mothering) is much harder; it is playing of two roles by one person, and can have some unwanted impact on the development of a child, especially where there is more than one child. It is 'carrying the world on one's shoulders' (Myer, 2012). As single parents are overburdened with the responsibility of assuming two roles, they often become irritable, impatient and insensitive to the needs of the children (Nzewuwah, 1995), thereby making them susceptible to anti-social, criminal and maladaptive behaviours already discussed.

Single mothers face stigmatization, discrimination, rejection and blackmail from the society (Essien & Basse, 2012). Single mothers are often demonized as

being promiscuous, though not all single mothers are such they have been put into such condition not because of any fault of theirs; or the cause of the death of their spouses (Keswet & Dapas, 2010), therefore being stigmatized, discriminated, rejected and blackmailed in the society, thereby withdrawing from social gatherings, feeling lonely, helpless, hopeless, depression and psychological trauma (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009).

Adelani and Ogunbanwo (2008), documents that unmarried fathers receive more condemnation than help and are confronted with serious carrier related problems as they find their solo children rearing role conflicting with work expectations.

Myles (2004) emphasised that stress is inherent in the situation of a woman trying to bring up her children alone, and for both parents. A husband may do little, but that little helps, and it is a comfort to have someone with whom to discuss the problem that may arise concerning the health, school performance and other matters concerning the children. Insecurity, financial pressure, lack of companion in the home and the burden of bringing up children alone all constitute stressful conditions which take their toll on the health of women who find themselves in the situation of being a single parent (Keswet & Dapas, 2010).

Single-parenthood according to Adelani

and Ogunbanwo (2008) has to do with loneliness, hence many single parents find themselves feeling isolated at one point or another. Also single-parents commonly experience difficulty with role identity, on taking up and fulfilling both roles of father and mother. Some form of social stigma is still attached to single-parent states regardless of how they were acquired, such as single parents who got pregnant are not allowed the benefit of maternity leave simply because they are not married. But the Beijing conference of 1996 has resolved this problem.

Psychological issues such as loneliness, anxiety, depression and bipolar disorders have been identified and documented by Meyer (2009) as psychological disorders common with single parents.

### **Conclusion**

The family is the basic unit of the society, and most important agent of socialisation for the child; and socialization of the child is important for the continuity of the society. The parents are the major stakeholders of this socialisation which involves the social, psychological, emotional, educational, moral and spiritual development of the child. Each parents has his/her role that has been defined by the society for proper development, therefore the importance of both parents in this task cannot be underestimated. As normal parenting is taking place situations could arise that could lead to single-parenting such as death

of one of the parent, divorce, desertion, teenage/unintended pregnancies, etc. Empirical evidence indicates that single parenting is on the increase worldwide and now being accepted in our society, not without its attendant psychological and social consequences on both the child/children and parents. Psychological consequences such as, loneliness, hostility, aggression, low self-esteem, criminal behaviours, alcohol and drug/substance abuse, poor academic performance, fear, anxiety, and many more. Social implications include stigmatization, discrimination, rejection, and blackmail by the society of children and parents, role identity crises, insecurity, and many more as documented by the various authors.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that, couples in a marriage should endeavour to settle their grievances and conflicts amicably, so as to save the children and themselves the consequences of single parenthood. Where single parenting is inevitable, the parents should endeavour to balance roles and seek support from extended and other family members so as to cope with the situation and significantly reduce psychosocial implication. Clinical psychological care should be given to children from single parent homes and their parents. The society should stop discriminating and stigmatizing children and parents from single parent homes.

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