

Community Perception of Single Parenting in Zaria, Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Child nurturing is usually a shared responsibility between both parents, until in recent times that lone parenting is becoming more widespread. Viewed in diverse ways by many authors, it is simply raising a child by one parent alone, whether the other parent is alive or not. This is seen as normal by some, and thus offer social support; or as absurd, unacceptable, shameful and thus stigmatized both the lone parents and their children. How does the Zaria community perceive single parenthood? A descriptive cross-sectional survey in two urban Local Government Areas in Zaria metropolis was conducted, using a researcher-constructed questionnaire. Data obtained from 270 respondents were analysed descriptively using SPSS 21.0. Results indicated that single parenting is a common reality in the study setting: the main causes of which include divorce, children born out of wedlock and some parents choosing to have children as single parents. It is believed that factors such as the quest for economic independence by some women as well as social approval/choices are contributory to its increasing prevalence. There are perceived positive and negative effects associated with single parenting. Many respondents advocated for some assistance such as provision of basic needs and free education for single-parent families and children, depending on the cause/route to single parenting. It is concluded that single parenting is an increasing social issue, with limited acceptance in the study area. Strengthening the family institution to reduce contention factors that break intact families should form part of social engineering to forestall negative effects of single parenting.

Keywords: Community perception; Parenting; Single-parent; Zaria

Introduction

There are increasing changes in the family structure in contemporary societies; one of which is the single-parent families. Raising a child or children by one parent, either the mother or father alone, for most of the time is reported to be quite challenging, placing extraordinary demands on both the parent and the children [1,2]. In some societies, as reported by a single mother, it is more of a stigma [3]. Globally, single parent families are however increasing rapidly. As reported by Grall [4], there are approximately 13.7 million single parents in US with more than 12 million single parents in custody of over 20 million children in 2000. This increased to 21.8 million children raised by single parents in 2009 (about 26% of children 21 years and below). In South Africa, about 28% of women are single parents.

Figures from Nigeria and other parts have also reported such increases [5]. Upsurge of single parents in Nigeria have been associated with two main routes, namely relationship breakdown/increasing rates of divorce and birth of child out of wedlock has been reported [1] although there are others links such as, being widowed, migration (migrant labour management) and people are choosing not to marry, because marriage in recent times appears no longer to serve interest of many women [5], causing many women who wish to have children to do so without marrying, opting to remain single parents.

In many societies, the phenomenon of single parenting is perceived differently, depending on the gender and aetiological analyses. Some societies discriminate against volunteered single parents more but tend to be sympathetic to those occasioned by death of spouse, aid to male single parents [6]. Mothers of children born out of wedlock appear to

be more negatively perceived, often placed in the most unfortunate position. Grall [4] reports that most individuals raising children alone, started out in committed relationships and never expected to be single parents.

Single parenthood has been seen as a deviant situation from normal in many areas, including in America and African traditional society, considering it as “Bad for Society” or detrimental to children’s self-esteem and to others [7]. Many negative effects associated with single parenthood particularly on children hinge on their susceptibility to delinquent behaviours, serious career related problems, and academic underachievement [5]. On the other hand, effects on the parents and society are seen more in role conflict, overwhelming financial difficulties, and general burden of bringing-up- children-alone-stress, coupled with some level of guilt feeling, and street-child syndrome contributing to unhealthy society, social harm and high poverty rates [8].

However, reports identified many positive effects of single parenting on the children, parents and even on the society such as the ability and ease with which to take all financial decisions, being close to children, undivided love thus maintaining closer ties, easier to make rules, and enforce such rules for children to follow [9]. Children in single-parent family are believed to contribute and participate more in family activities and therefore children grow up with a sense of respect responsible citizens, as well as allowing parents spend quality time, thus increasing bonding. On addition, children tend experience community support and warmth from extended families and contribute/participate more in family activities. It is also reported that some have more empathetic, sensitive, caring adults because of their deprivation, thus getting more support and assistance.

These and some socio-economic arguments must have been responsible for some of the changing views about single parents. Even in Nigeria, it seems to be becoming a norm rather than anomaly, where children born into such families are legitimized even if the child has never seen a father. Adelani and Ogunbanwo [5] report changing views of singlehood as an alternative to manage children especially in Southwest Nigeria. They reported that a single parent (in many cases mother) can choose to have sex at will with any man of her choice, have her own house, have a child or even children. She does not see any need to sacrifice her freedom in the name of marriage, which might interpret as a form of bondage. In some of these scenarios, such single mothers even gain the respect of friends and co-workers.

These changing views exist in many communities. In Zaria, there is obvious lack of previous data on this social reality. This study therefore investigated the community perceptions about single parenting, the perceived effects the children raised in single parent families as well as whether or not single parent families require any form of support from agencies. This is with a view to generating (baseline) data for decision on health education, social infrastructure and future research.

Subjects and Materials

Design and setting

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in Zaria metropolis, which consists of two Local Government Areas, namely Sabon Gari and Zaria LGA. It is an urban settlement, made up of traditional people and civil servants. As a Centre of learning, with many institutions of higher learning including a Teaching Hospital, most of the settlements are inhabited by diverse population including ethnic groupings which are predominantly Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Ibos, and many other Nigerian and foreign tribes. Sabon Gari LGA is a more heterogeneous setting than Zaria LGA as it is primarily a settlement for 'strangers,' where other tribes other the Hausa-Fulani settle more. This study focuses on the Nigerian ethnic groupings living in the two LGAs.

Study population and sampling

The target population consisted of all adult male and female in the two LGAs. However, in each LGA only one district was purposively selected. One hundred and fifty (150) households or compounds were systematically selected; 90 in Sabon Gari LGA and 60 in Zaria LGA. More households were purposively selected in Sabon Gari to accommodate the more diverse population compared to the district selected in Zaria LGA which is a more homogeneous setting, predominantly Hausa-Fulani Muslims. In each household two respondents were selected, preferably a male and female while in the compound between three and five household/families were selected. In some of these selected households or families, only one respondent (adult, male or female) accepted to participate in the study. In all, 291 subjects participated.

Instrument for data collection

A researcher-constructed questionnaire made up of five sections was used to collect information, and a total of 36 question item. The Section A consisted of information on the seven socio-demographic variables (gender, age, marital status, ethnic group, religion, educational attainment and occupation); Section B was on the awareness the perception the single parenting, made up seven questions; Section C on Effects measured by six questions including

"do you think single parenting has any effect – yes or No;" state which is the effect of single parenting – positive, negative or both;" "which effect would you consider more – positive or negative;" "what do you think are the possible effects...choose as many as you think;" "who do you think is the most affected by single parenting – child, parent or society?" Sections D has nine question measuring the perceptions on what categories of single parents require more support/assistance and Section E made up of eight question was on the perceived factors influencing single parenting in the community.

The instrument was validated by three senior academics who are specialist in family sociology and medical experts; reliability test was ascertained by test retest, confirmed by Cronbach coefficient of 0.69.

Data collection

Following Institutional Ethical Clearance, permission was obtained from the District Heads of the selected study areas and household heads. Individual informed consents were also obtained from participants, ensuring safety of participants and their information. Three trained female research assistants assisted in administering the questionnaires, who, in many cases, had to use the instrument as a interview schedule for some of the study participants who were could not read or write in English Language. They had to move from house to house to recruit willing respondents. The data collection took place in the evenings (between 4.30-6.30 PM) for over five weeks to complete because many of the respondents especially in Sabon Gari were either business people or civil servants who usually returned home at that time. Several times research assistants had to visit up to three times before a questionnaire could be retrieved. Female participants were more willing (and available) to be included in the study. Out of the 291 questionnaires administered, 282 were retrieved.

Data analysis

Data editing and cleaning was done; only 270 questionnaires were fit for analysis. These were coded and entered into Microsoft Excel and later loaded unto the SPSS 21.0 for descriptive analysis to meet research objectives.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

Out of 270 respondents, females constituted the majority (190, 70.4%) as against males (80, 29.6%). There were more married ones (187, 69.3%) than single respondents (83, 30.7%) with Hausa forming the majority (143, 53.0%), Yoruba (63, 23.3%) and Igbo and other Nigerian tribes forming the remaining 23.7% (64). Respondents were also predominantly Muslims (204, 75.6%), with Christians forming the remaining 24.4% (66). Their occupational affiliations include Business (43, 15.9%), Civil servant (56, 20.7%), Artisan (21, 7.7%), self-employed (24, 8.8%), and others (120, 44.4%). The gender, religion, ethnic groups and the marital status of the respondents were compared with their opinions on the acceptance of single parenthood.

Awareness and knowledge of single parenting

All the respondents know that single parenting is "only one parent raising a child." They are also aware of the existence of the phenomenon but as shown in Figure 1, 83.7% (n=226) of the respondents reported being aware of parents who are raising their

children alone in the study area. This indicates that single parenting is a common social phenomenon in the study area. Out of the 226, 222 (98.2%) believe that there are increasing cases of single parenting in the study setting (Figure 1).

Children born out of wedlock	72	26.7
Migration of parents	43	15.9

Table 1: Perceived causes of single parenthood.

Apart from the immediate causes, many other socio-economic factors are believed to be linked to the increasing cases of single parenting in the study area. As shown in Table 2, economic independence especially of women (38.5%), social approval (39.5%) and lack of patience in matrimonial home (34.5%) account for the increasing cases.

Factor (N=226)	Frequency*	Percentages (%)
Social approval/choice	87	38.5
Lack of patience/intolerance	78	34.5
Economic status/Career	131	58
Crisis/wars	26	11.5

Table 2: Factors responsible for perceived increasing cases of single parenting.

Perceptions about single parenting

Of the 270 respondents, 171 (63.3%) of them perceived single parenting as either bad or very bad, indicating it is not acceptable; only 19.3% (n=52) see it as acceptable (Figure 3). One respondent commented and said: “Single parenting is abnormal”

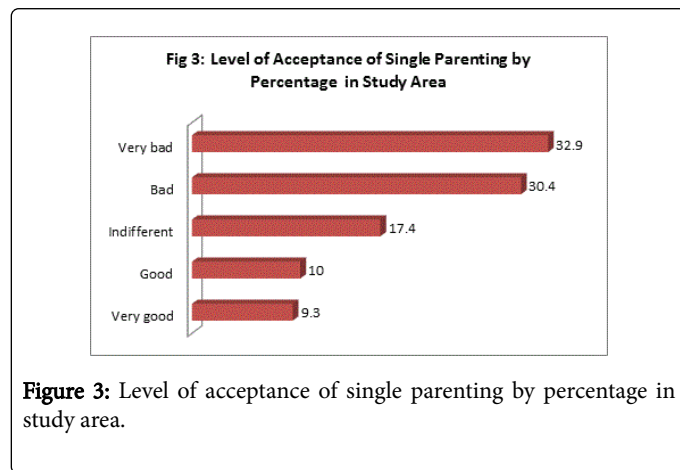


Figure 3: Level of acceptance of single parenting by percentage in study area.

The respondents' gender, religion, marital status, and ethnicity seem to affect the level of acceptance of single parenting, as shown presented in Table 3.

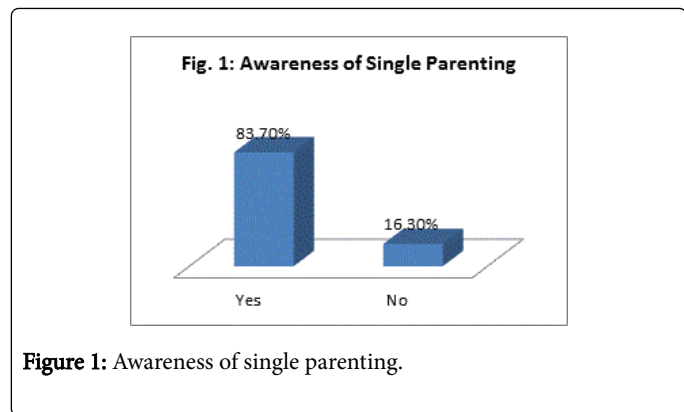


Figure 1: Awareness of single parenting.

Among the 226 study participants who acknowledged the phenomenon in their neighbourhood, majority (95.5%, n=216) of them believed that most single parents are females; only 4.5% (10) are said to be male parents (Figure 2).

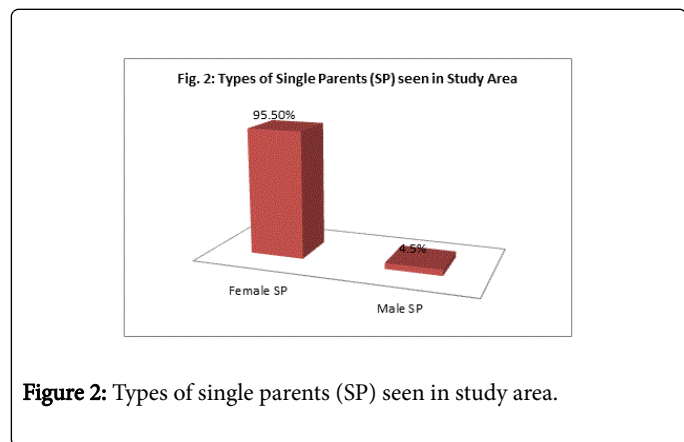


Figure 2: Types of single parents (SP) seen in study area.

There are many perceived causes of the increasing cases of single parents in the setting. From multiple responses in Table 1, divorce (64.4%), being widowed (57.0%), and parents choosing to remain single (40.7%) are reported as the main reasons for single parenthood. Children born out of wedlock (26.7%) and migration of parents due to many other factors (15.9%) are also reasons.

Cause	Frequency	Percentages
Divorced	174	64.4
Widowed	154	57
Single parent by choice	110	40.7

Variable	Level of Acceptance of Single Parenting					Total (%)
	V. Good (%)	Good (%)	Indifferent (%)	Bad (%)	V. Bad (%)	
Gender:						
Male	1 (1.2)	2 (2.5)	6 (7.5)	50 (62.5)	21 (26.2)	80 (100.0)

Female	24 (12.6)	25 (13.2)	41 (21.6)	32 (16.8)	68 (35.8)	190 (100.0)
Total	25 (9.2)	27 (10.0)	47 (17.4)	82 (30.4)	89 (33.0)	270 (100.0)
Marital status:						
Single	8 (9.6)	11 (13.3)	5 (6.0)	31 (37.3)	28 (33.7)	83 (100.0)
Married	17 (9.0)	16 (8.6)	42 (22.5)	51 (27.3)	61 (32.6)	187 (100.0)
Total	25 (9.2)	27(10.0)	47 (17.4)	82 (30.4)	89 (33.0)	270 (100.0)
Religion:						
Christianity	6 (9.1)	11 (16.7)	13 (19.7)	16 (24.2)	20 (30.3)	66 (100.0)
Islam	19 (9.3)	16 (7.8)	34 (16.7)	66 (32.4)	69 (33.8)	204 (100.0)
Total	25 (9.2)	27 (10.0)	47 (17.4)	82 (30.4)	89 (33.0)	270 (100.0)
Ethnic Group:						
Hausa	3 (2.1)	15 (10.4)	31 (21.7)	53 (37.1)	41 (28.7)	143 (100.0)
Yoruba	5 (7.9)	2 (3.2)	4 (6.3)	24 (38.1)	28 (44.4)	63 (100.0)
Others	17 (26.5)	10 (15.6)	12 (18.8)	5 (7.8)	20 (31.3)	64(100.0)
Total	25 (9.2)	27 (10.0)	47 (17.4)	82 (30.4)	89 (33.0)	270 (100.0)

Table 3: Community level of acceptance of single parenting.

As indicated in Table 3, males tend to consider single parenting more unacceptable (88.7% see it as bad/very bad) than females (52.6% as bad/very bad). However, females appear to be more neutral in judging the phenomenon as good or bad. For marital status, both single and married respondents consider single parenting as bad or very bad almost equally (61.0% and 59.9%, respectively), with the married respondents being more indifferent/neutral (22.5%).

Similarly, the two main religions in the study area see single parenting as bad/very bad. However, Muslims tend to condemn it more (66.7%) than Christians (54.5%), but Christians perceive tolerable as slightly more than a quarter of them (25.8%) see it as good/very good compared to Muslims (17.1%). In addition, Hausa and Yoruba both consider single parenting as unacceptable, with Yoruba (78.5%) and Hausa (65.8%) rated it as bad/very bad. Other ethnic groups including Ibos and Ebara perceive single parenting relatively more positive (42.1% as good/very good).

However, when asked about the preferred method of bringing up children, majority (82.2%, n=222) prefer both parents; only 8.9% of them were either indifferent or would prefer single parents taking care of children.

On the effects of single parenting, respondents believed that there is more pronounced effects on the child than on the parents and society. Almost 7% of the respondents stated that single parenthood has more serious effects on the child (Table 4), compared to the perception of its effects on society (10.7%), parents (6.3%) and other family members (4.1%).

Variable	Frequency	Percentages
Child	213	78.9
Parents	17	6.3

Society	29	10.7
Family	11	4.1
Total	270	100

Table 4: The most affected in Single Parenthood.

Respondents however presented two sets of sequelae on children being raised by only one parent: possible and negative effects. Most respondents (n=154; 57.0%) believed there are some positive effects compared to 116 (43.0%) who would not agree that there are any good aspects of the phenomenon. Table 5 summarises what are believed to be the positive effects.

Perceived Positive Effects	Frequency*	Percentages
Parents face a lot of respect/do economically better	130	48.1
Children participate in their training and make them committed adults	45	16.7
Excellent Good communication between child and parent	23	8.5
Extended family participate and increase bonding	34	12.5

Table 5: Possible positive effects of single parenting.

However, virtually all respondents (94.8%) stated that there are negative effects; only 5.2% (n=14) think otherwise. The negative consequences stated are shown in Table 6.

Variables	Frequency*	Percentages
Juvenile delinquency	108	40
Children from single parent families have emotional/behavioural problems	45	16.6
Children from single parent families do poorly in school	45	16.6
Single parent families means broken home	37	13.7
Being brought up in single parent families destroys children's self esteem	25	9.3
Single parents are not self sufficient	21	7.731.8
Insecurity	86	45.5
Financial pressure	123	22.2
Susceptibility	60	34.4
Lack of companion	93	41.8
Burden of bringing up child	113	26.3
Social stigma	71	22.2
Emotional swing	60	16.3
Delinquency	44	14.4
Strained relationship in society	39	21.1
Strained relationship between child and parent	57	26.6
Role confusion	72	----
Anti-social behavior	74	27.4
Lasting pain/bitterness	70	25.9
Children learn not to trust	64	23.7

Table 6: Problems of children of single parenting.

As shown in Table 6, the negative consequences are relational difficulties, emotional gaps, economic challenges and academic/vocational under achievements. Therefore, most respondents stated that single parents need some form of assistance. Such assistance should cover specific areas of need as indicated in Table 7, especially the provision of basic needs including feeding (25.0%).

Variable	Frequency*	Percentages
Basic needs shelter, feeding	67	25
Health insurance	36	13.3
Job opportunity	60	22.2
Free education for children	42	15.6
Make policy to favour single parent	39	14.4
Financial assistance	19	7

Reunion/Marriage by social workers	7	2.6
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Table 7: Areas of assistance to single parents, *Multiple responses.

Several reasons given for the assistance include easing financial burden for parents 46.6%, to help children fit into society 22.4%, among others. Although such assistances are proposed, respondents are more inclined to provide help to those widowed (75.0%) than any other categories of single parents (Table 8).

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Widowed	203	75.1
Divorced	41	15.2
Out of wedlock	13	4.8
By choice	5	1.9
Relationship break	8	3
Total	270	100

Table 8: Who should be helped among single parents?

Discussion

Majority (70.4%) of study participants are predominantly Hausa-Muslim females with diverse occupational activities among which civil servants (20.7%) and business were common. The preponderance of females is due to their ready available at home during data collection particularly in Hausa Muslim dominant community like Zaria, a Northern Nigerian community. The town is also endowed with educational and military institutions, partially explaining the presence of many civil servants as well as business people.

Awareness and knowledge of single parenting

In most northern Nigerian settings, single parenting is perceived as rare. However, the high level of awareness of its existence (98.2%) in the immediate study vicinity point to the increasing reality of the phenomenon. This study appears to be the first to reveal this reality, although it has also been reported variously in other parts of Nigeria other than northern Nigeria [5,10] and elsewhere. This indicates that single parenting is becoming a global issue.

Our study indicates that there are more female single-parents than males, attributable to many causes; divorce is reported to be leading cause (64.4%), and others such as having a child out of wedlock and some opting to be single parents (as shown in Table 1). Similar findings are reported across the globe [11]. In this study, some other factors such as desires of female parents for economic independence, career and lack of patience in marriage are also believed to have attributed to the increasing rates of single-parenthood (as shown in Table 2). This agrees with earlier reports in southern Nigeria [5,6]. No such data had existed in the study area before now.

Perceptions on single parenting

This study found varied perceptions about single parenting, but majority (82.2%) preferred both parents bringing up the child together. Hilton and Devall [12] had reported such significant perceptual

differences in favour of intact families; emphasising the preference of intact families over single-parent families in child upbringing.

Describing single-parenting generally as either “very bad” or “bad” and thus “it is abnormal,” our findings show that the two main sets of religious adherents in the study setting (Muslims and Christians) generally perceived it as unacceptable (“bad” or “very bad”), with a few religionists being “indifferent”; while a few even see it as good/very good. The phenomenon is thus generally an unwelcoming social reality in the study areas. Although, previous reports elsewhere also see it as “Bad for Society” [7], there was no previous available finding on the perception of single parenting by religious affiliations in the study area.

Single parenting style is believed to have effects both on the children and their parents, and in fact, the society at large. Interestingly, these effects are reported in two ways: both positive and negative. Perceived positive effects of single parenting are the “respect for the single parent” and “ease of financial and economic decisions” while the children of single-parent families are believed to develop more self-resilience and learn to be independence faster, with better parent-child bonding as well as better communication between the parent the children than those from intact families. The similar positive effects were previously documented in southern parts of Nigeria [5,9].

Interestingly, even among respondents who reported some perceived positive effects, many still believed that single parenting has many negative consequences, including psycho-social problems, behavioural problems and academic performance for the child while the single-parent suffer economic hardship, lack of companion, role confusion as well as insecurity. Previously, Nwachukwu [13] and Burge [14] had reported similar negative effects arising from poor child supervision particularly following “absence of father figure”.

Respondents believe that supports in form of basic needs, job opportunities and free education for the children should be given but not all single parents deserve support, largely depending on the cause of single parenting. In this study single parents by choice or having a child out of wedlock are not likely to readily get support but discrimination, unlike the widowed who is seen as circumstantial “death induced.” This finding is similar to what Allers [6] described as “a single-mother hierarchy” in her article on single parenting. Hence, some authors have also reported that loss of spouse gets public sympathy [11] and some single parents find themselves in it unplanned for, such as in broken relationship [4]. This opinions makes support a social decision. This could probably imply the unwelcoming idea of such choice in the community unlike death as a cause. Gender gradient for single-parents also exist, as reports have shown preference for single fathers. According to Friedrichs [8], society “martyr” single fathers but often “demonise” single mother as primary parents. Even among the single mothers, society secretly categorises them in gradient of respectability, praising some and demonising others usually across racial and socio-economic lines [6], depending on income, race and most important how one becomes a single mother. Even the widowed, divorced or once-married gradient rating is often “validated” by a patriarchal structure [11], favouring the single-fathers.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From the study, it is obvious that raising a child by one parent (single parenting) is a public knowledge and on the increase with various causes and factors (such as divorce, widowed as well as economic independence and choice). However, the phenomenon is generally unwelcomed in the study setting. Various effects have also been associated with single parenting. The positive effects offer better psychosocial functioning while the negative effects pose emotional, behavioural and social dysfunctions. There is a general belief of needed assistance by the victims but this hinges on the cause/circumstance leading to the phenomenon. Hence, assistance is not likely to be enjoyed by all single parenting owing to the fact that generally is unacceptable.

It is therefore recommended that there is need to strengthen marriage institution to promote stable family pattern. There should be a network of social support for families affected to tackle negative effects of single parenting as well as campaigns against discrimination of such families. Also, there is need for a wide coverage research on this menace.

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