CHANGING TIMES FOR WORKING SINGLE MOTHERS: REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GIRL CHILD FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Lewis M. Ngesu
Lecturer
Department of Educational Foundations,
University of Nairobi, Kenya. (ngesu2002@yahoo.com)

Dr. William Anangisye
Senior Lecturer,
Department of Educational Foundations, Management and Lifelong Learning,
School of Education, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
(wanangisye@yahoo.com)

Beth Mwelu
School of Education, Moi University (bethmuema@gmail.com)

Abstract: *In the recent past, the issue of working single mothers and the academic performance of their girl child has often been the focus of public debate. This paper highlights the changing times of single working mothers in relation to performance of the girl child from a historical perspective. The data for the study was collected using a questionnaire and interviews. Data was collected from Kitui, Kiambu and Uasin Gishu districts in Kenya, East Africa. Three hundred and five single and coupled parents were randomly sampled for the study. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS software programme. The findings showed that most working single mothers had readjusted to a sudden situation (single parenthood) and were offering the girl child the best education within the prevailing conditions. Though the law regarding property ownership and matters of inheritance have been reviewed and documented, the issue of actual ownership by single mothers is yet to be fully addressed. The failure to appreciate single mothers and the attendant parenting pressure is likely to affect the girl child academic achievement. On the basis of these findings the study recommends that single mothers be recognized as dual parents and that the girl-child be protected from any form of discrimination.*

Introduction

Traditionally, it was the responsibility of the man to head his household. Even when a husband died, the widow was married to another man within the clan (Were, 1985: 5).

Consequently women did not have the responsibility of heading households. The situation has changed tremendously as women become more educated; career oriented, and more financially independent, a large majority marries while others do not marry at all. This fact has meant that women in both rural and urban areas are now taking responsibilities which traditionally were not theirs (Kevin 1989: 185).

It is not common for single parents to feel overload with too much responsibility and too much to do. The difficulties of providing for their own and their children physical and emotional need often results in role overload and fatigue. The stress of single mothers is experienced in three main areas namely; children, money and loneliness (Standard on Sunday 1994:3, Lewis 2010).

Some children assume quilt for their status believing erroneously that it is shameful to come from broken family or single family, however much of the hardship facing lone parents and children is directly related to the economic exploitation of women and to the fact that women in general and mothers in particular as if they were economically dependent on man (Lewis, 2010). The average income of ones single parent is under half of that of two parents average income. For most of them good housing is a nightmare, many are homeless or often have to share overcrowded and often substandard accommodation at punitive rents. Finally, the legal system, both the laws and courts are experienced as a bewildering absurd machine, perfectly designed to foster as much bitterness and frustrations as possible among people trying to extricate themselves from their marriages.

The economic situation in Africa is such that both men and women strive to earn a living through salaried employment. This forces the parents to leave the young ones with relatives or house girls who have very little experiences, if any and interest in the child care. This causes a lot of psychological and social problems in the child. Problems such as indiscipline and poor performance may affect the child negatively in the future and the community in which he or she lives. Further, the absence of either parent can be used to explain some abnormal behaviour among children.

In Kenya, there is a growing problem concerning the increase of young unmarried mothers who are found in rural and urban centres (Kenya Institute of Education1987:24, Kibera and Kimokoti 2007). In the arid and semi arid regions single female parenthood is confounded by retrogressive practices such as early marriage, moranism and Female Genital mutilation are rampant. These practices that go back to historical times have no place in modern times. According to Ngome (2002) and Chiuri and Kiumi (2005), these factors have led to poor school participation of the primary school age group among the nomadic communities.

Parents have a duty, first to expose their children to the psychological conditions that facilitate the development of their capacities for self-determination or autonomy. Secondly they have a duty to raise their children in such a way as to promote their self fulfillment, for which primary goods like self respect and health are necessary. Due to cultural limitation, girls of single and married parents are disadvantaged as some societies argue that a woman does not need to be educated because unlike man who is the head of the family and bread earner, she is expected to be a home maker and mother.

The absence of either parent is more markedly felt during the child adolescence. However, one danger of single parent family remains the loss of parent-child relationship and the development of a "buddy- buddy" friendship between the mother and child. In such families the child is considered to be more mature than he or she is. The single parent relies on the child for emotional support, help in decision making, freely expressing bitterness towards the ex-spouse and frustrations with the numerous burdens and social relations.

Are working single female parents more sensitive than coupled parents in regard to socialization of children?

Many factors influence how children develop in single parent families: the parents' age, education level, and occupation of the parent, family's income, and the family's social network of friends and extended family members (Lewis 2010). Research findings show that children of single working parents are mature and likely to share more household responsibilities. It's common for single working mothers to discuss issues with their children (no matter the sensitivity of the issue) which, in other families, are usually discussed only between parents. The situation is confounded by the fact that single parent families are on the rise owing to a combination of factors. Accordingly, divorce and separation rates have been going up as individuals find themselves unable to put up with unsatisfactory marriage. After divorce, income tends to drop sharply for mothers. Krein (1986) found children in single parent family were twice likely to drop out of school as children living with two parent families. The researcher also found out that children in single-parents homes were also likely to have their own marriages end in separation or divorce and are at higher risk for unmarried parenthood. This was a rare phenomenon in African societies but a common occurrence today.

In her research, Mbae (1984) reports the fact that women (married or single) have filled diverse roles in their home activities, as wives in the personal lives with their husbands, as mothers in their responsibilities for the development of their children and as home makers. However, whatever the reason for becoming a single parent is not easy to be one. In his

book, Kerre (1989) highlights the special problem that children of such parents are likely to face. These include:

- lack of complete parental care;
- Those who are single either due to divorce or due to a child born outside wedlock, may find it difficult in trying to explain to their children who their father is. It will not pay to tell lies;
- The social stigma attached to a single mother especially by labeling her as "loose" while the girl may regard herself as a failure;
- Most single parents face the difficult of providing sufficiently for the needs of children both materially and mentally.

In a related study in Kenya, on divorce and its effects in Kenya (Joan, 1992) found out that a child whose parents are divorced face long emotional problems that appear later in life. Children of two and half years and below experienced regression in toilet training, irritability, crying, anxieties, confusions and tantrums. At the age of five to six, girls are more vulnerable to loss of father and they maintain sad fantasies of recovering their father with their love. The study concluded that such girls usually function poorly in school.

Methodology

The research study employed both quantitative and qualitative approach. These approaches were preferred because they provide insight and understanding of activities carried out in the sampled districts (Kasomo 2006).
Due to financial and time limitations the research was conducted in Kitui, Kiambu and Uasin Gishu districts in Kenya. Due to its vastness, the districts have a significant number of single mothers and coupled parents. Both samples contained

- males and females;
- parents in both "difficult" geographical and "comfortable" zones;
- the employed, unemployed and self employed;
- divorced, widows, Married, single by choice and widower; and
- denominational background.

Data analysis consisted mainly of detailed report on what was observed, information generated from questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were held with parents in order to get more information on recent trends and patterns of life among single mothers. In order to explore the main reason for this significant change, parents were asked to rank reasons in order of their importance during the interview sessions. Data was analyzed

according to the objectives of the study. The following questions were used as guidelines during the analysis;

- What are the financial problems that single parents through divorce face as they bring up their children?
- What adjectives are used to describe single female parents and why?
- What are the sources of income for female single parents by choice in educating their children?
- How are single parents portrayed in relations with others members of the community and why?

Results

Background of the parents

Data obtained through the Questionnaire indicated that 47 (15.5%) were divorced, 34 (11.1%) were widows, 145 (47.5%) were married, 63 (43.7%) were single parents by choice and 16 (5.2%) were widowers.

Table 1: Marital Status of the Sampled Parents

Marital Status	**F**	**%**
Divorced	47	15.5
Widow	34	11..1
Married	145	47.5
Single	63	43.7
Widower	16	5.2
Total	305	100

Further the parents were asked about their source of income and denomination. It was reported that 99 (32.4%) of the respondents were employed, 99 (32.4%) were unemployed and 107 (35.2%) were self employed. In addition 110 (36.1%) respondents were Catholics, 114 (37.4%) were Protestants, 48 (15.3%) were Muslims 15 (5.0%) Hindus and 19 (6.2%) were traditionalists.

Findings: Financially related problems that single parents (through divorce or single by choice) face as they bring up their children

The findings of this research revealed that the ten most frequently selected financially related problems were:

- Inadequate school fees for school going children;
- Insufficient food;
- Inadequate shelter;
- Inadequate land for putting up structures;
- Inadequate clothing;
- Lack of stable jobs;
- Inadequate learning materials for school going children;
- Insufficient funds for proper health care;
- Lack of adequate external family support; and
- Inadequate farming equipments for rural single parents

The data examined shows the many disadvantages single parents have over the working coupled parents. Lack of money or financial constraints crown the many disadvantages and this explains why most children born by single parents through divorce or by choice are out of school, doing odd jobs while some have turned into acts of lawlessness.

Adjectives used to describe single female parents family and why.

Interviews showed that there are a number of negative attributes used against single female parents. These responses varied across the geographical locations and regions where this research was conducted. The moral debate tends to be between the modernist and traditionalist with the modernist welcoming or accepting the changes in the family structure, while the traditionalist decry the declines in marriage and the rises in divorce, cohabitation and single parenthood.

This particular study revealed a number of attributes used against single parents. Some of these attributes were; women alone, husband snatchers, family breakers, loose, good for nothing people, betrayers and cowards. The one negative finding in this study was that there was a high delinquency among teenage children of working single mothers who were involved in such things as truancy, ungovernability, petty theft, vandalism and offenses involving sex and alcohol. These behaviours were common among children in both rural and urban regions contrally to the past beliefs that they were confined in urban areas.

Sources of income of female single parents in educating their children.

The findings of this research question highlighted several sources of income for single parents in the following order:

- Farming;
- Buying and selling charcoal;
- Weaving local basket for sale;
- Picking coffee and tea;
- Carrying stones for sale;
- Working as bar and house maids;
- Seeking assistance from Churches and Non-governmental organizations;
- Knitting clothes for sale;
- Employment (formal); and threshing sisal for sale.

The findings of this research question seem to suggest that farming was the core source of income (especially for rural single parent); however, other economic activities were equally important because they supplemented farming. These findings provide a basis for concluding that a large number of single parent would continue being committed to the welfare of their families by doing some odd jobs if the have no other alternative.

Single female parents in relationship with other members of the community.

The study found out that most of juvenile activities and even violence is perceived to be related to incidences of family background. It was reported that most single mothers did not mix freely with other members of the community for fear of being victimized, that they spoil other women (other than the spoiled single mothers) while if seen with men, most people believed that they were seducing them. This situation according to research findings seems to be accentuated by:

- Low social interaction which contribute to their high social isolation and ;
- Low esteem, negative self image that contribute to their self denial and hostile attitudes towards the wider community.

However the career women or educated in this sample were less likely to be at risk of poverty and therefore it cushions them against “blanket” condemnations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The data presented in this paper reveals that single parenthood is an emerging and common phenomenon in the society today. The issues facing single female parents are too complex and pressing. Yet, as the study data reveal most of the parents in this study sample were ready to offer education to their children. This finding implies that education was the best gift these parents could give to their children in order for them to fit in the competitive world.

The study highlights that female single mother and males are negatively labeled and experience the same stigma. This implies that if members of the society are not sensitized on the role of single parenthood in the society in terms of social, political and economic development, then the society may face stagnation. Therefore a society must be educated on the imperative of single parents' participation in development as equal partners.

There are financial constraints that affect single parents, as well as widows, widowers and coupled parents. This problem could be alleviated if the Ministry of culture and social services provided credit facilities for all categories of parents especially the poor. Further single female parents and especially those in rural areas need to be sensitized about their status in law and consulted about possible changes which would help them. Their suggestions should be solicited and accorded due respect and attention.

Finally the findings of the study have shown that societies are male dominated and gender blind in orientation. The single parents (either by choice or divorce) that rise into positions of authority are looked down by most men because women tend to viewed as "secondary bread winner". A need therefore arises to understand that men and women have different needs and roles to play hence addressing the question of gender. It is recommended that both men and women should be gender sensitive; for example, the relationship between man and woman in development should be seen as being complementary and supportive in nature. This sensitization is required in order for all to appreciate the woman's identity, her rights, needs and multiple roles. Although the government has put intervention programmes and policies, of 50 to 50 percent job sharing across the board (Government of Kenya, 2010) the situation is on the ground is wanting. A caring approach through a focus on respect and understanding, not on name calling and game blame is crucial.

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