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## Pillars of Strength: How Support Systems Shape the Mental Well-being of Single Parents in Woodley Ward, Nairobi City County, Kenya

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<p><b>Chief Editor</b> Web: <a href="http://www.ijssc.org">www.ijssc.org</a> Email: <a href="mailto:info@ijssc.org">info@ijssc.org</a></p> <p><b>Editing Oversight</b> Impericals Consultants International Limited</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> Single parents often face socioeconomic challenges that place them at heightened risk of poor mental well-being. This study examined how social support systems, alongside other socioeconomic factors, influence the mental health of single parents in Woodley Ward, Nairobi County, Kenya. Guided by the ecological systems theory and the transactional theory of stress and coping, a descriptive cross-sectional design was employed. Using simple random sampling, 278 single parents participated in the study, and data were collected through a mixed-methods approach. Results indicated that coping mechanisms (<math>\beta = 0.49, p &lt; 0.001</math>) and income levels (<math>\beta = 0.39, p &lt; 0.001</math>) were the strongest positive predictors of mental well-being. Access to support systems also significantly improved mental health outcomes (<math>\beta = 0.28, p &lt; 0.001</math>), while a higher number of dependents negatively impacted wellbeing (<math>\beta = -0.19, p &lt; 0.001</math>). Employment type had a modest but significant effect (<math>\beta = -0.10, p = 0.048</math>), with stable jobs slightly reducing stress. The findings highlight the essential role of accessible and effective support networks in enhancing resilience and reducing psychological distress among single parents. The study recommends integrating targeted mental health awareness and social support initiatives into community health services to strengthen the well-being of single-parent households.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Support Systems, mental, well-being, single parent, Kenya</p>
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### 1.1 Introduction

Single parents encounter multifaceted socioeconomic challenges that exert a profound influence on their mental well-being, with depression and anxiety emerging as prominent concerns (Kareem et al., 2024). The absence of a partner concentrates financial, caregiving, and social responsibilities on one individual, intensifying emotional strain and fostering feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness during periods of economic difficulty. Consequently, single parents are at a significantly higher risk of psychological distress compared to coupled parents, a disparity often compounded by inadequate or absent support systems (Rees et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2019).

Gender plays a decisive role in shaping these experiences. Single mothers typically earn lower incomes, face greater stigma, and bear the disproportionate weight of patriarchal social structures, particularly in

contexts such as Kenya, where men possess higher economic bargaining power (Lu et al., 2020). International evidence corroborates these disparities: in the USA, depression affects 33% of single mothers compared to 8% of partnered women, while poverty rates are markedly higher among single-parent households (Parolin & Lee, 2022). In Japan, high levels of poverty and entrenched stigma against single mothers contribute to widespread psychological distress (Dhungel et al., 2023). Across contexts, poverty strongly correlates with poor mental health outcomes, especially for those living below the poverty line (Reinert, 2024; Diwakar & Shepherd, 2018).

Within sub-Saharan Africa, financial strain in single-parent households often extends to children, increasing exposure to adverse childhood experiences (Oni et al., 2021). In Uganda, the absence of robust social support systems and the cumulative demands of parenting—exacerbated by a higher number of dependents—significantly heighten the risk of poor mental health outcomes (Atekyereza, 2018; Bago, 2022). Cultural perceptions further shape these experiences: in Tanzania, societal stigma and systemic discrimination against single mothers limit economic opportunities and perpetuate mental distress (Kikwale et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, inadequate financial and emotional support undermines parenting quality and increases the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes for children (Ahiaku & Ajani, 2022).

In Kenya, single parents—particularly those in low-income urban settlements—report high levels of distress and hopelessness, with over 50% lacking access to adequate mental health or economic resources (Clark et al., 2024). The poverty rate among single parents (36%) surpasses that of married couples (25%), reflecting persistent socioeconomic disadvantage. These disparities underscore the centrality of support systems—both formal and informal—in mitigating psychological strain and enhancing resilience. Understanding the interplay between socioeconomic stressors, cultural context, and the availability of support networks is essential for designing targeted interventions that safeguard the mental wellbeing of single parents.

#### Statement of the Problem

Single-parent families encounter distinct and multifaceted challenges that place them at heightened risk of compromised mental wellbeing. The dual burden of providing for the family and managing all aspects of parenting alone can generate sustained psychological strain, increasing vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders (Ali & Soomar, 2019). These challenges are often compounded by socioeconomic disadvantages, with single-parent households facing approximately twice the risk of poverty compared to two-parent families. Limited financial resources, coupled with the emotional and time demands of sole caregiving, can overwhelm a parent's coping capacity, creating a cyclical relationship between unmet needs and mental distress.

The availability and quality of social support—both formal (e.g., access to social services, community programs) and informal (e.g., support from family, friends, and networks)—are critical determinants of resilience in single-parent households. However, when such support systems are absent or insufficient, the risk of poor mental health outcomes is magnified. Low socioeconomic status (SES) in particular exacerbates stressors, as single parents struggle to meet basic needs, maintain stable social connections, and provide consistent mentorship to their children. This combination of financial hardship, limited time, and inadequate support often creates a persistent state of psychological strain.

In Woodley Ward, Nairobi, single parents may face unique socioeconomic stressors due to high poverty levels, limited access to social services, and the pressures of urban living. While the prevalence of single-parent households in Kenya continues to rise, there is a paucity of empirical research examining how socioeconomic factors, mediated by the presence or absence of social support, influence the mental well-being of this population. Addressing this gap is crucial for informing evidence-based interventions and policies aimed at strengthening support systems for single parents, enhancing their resilience, and improving mental health outcomes.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

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## **1.3 Literature review**

In this section, theoretical review and empirical review on how support systems shape the mental well-being of single parents will be presented.

### **1.3.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977), a social developmental framework that explains how multiple environmental systems interact to shape an individual's well-being, including mental health. The theory identifies five interrelated systems—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—each exerting a different level of influence (Guy-Evans, 2020). The microsystem, comprising immediate social contexts such as family, friends, workplace, and neighborhood, has the most direct impact, while the chronosystem encompasses life

transitions and sociohistorical changes over time. Human development is viewed as the outcome of dynamic interactions across these systems, making the theory particularly relevant for exploring the social relationships and environmental influences that affect the mental well-being of single parents. By examining the factors operating at each ecological level, the study can assess how their interplay shapes mental health outcomes.

One limitation of the Ecological Systems Theory is its limited attention to individual differences in coping or resilience, focusing instead on the broader social context. To address this, the study integrates the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), developed by Folkman and Lazarus, which emphasizes the interaction between personal needs and available resources (Biggs et al., 2017). According to TTSC, stress arises when perceived demands exceed coping resources, and mental wellbeing is shaped by the strategies individuals use to manage stress. The theory distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which targets the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which addresses the emotional consequences of stress. Applied to single parents, this dual approach provides a framework for understanding how access to social support, along with adaptive coping strategies, can mitigate psychological distress and promote resilience despite socioeconomic challenges.

### **1.3.2 Empirical Review of Literature**

Single parents face substantial social and economic challenges that heighten their vulnerability to poverty and chronic stress, thereby increasing the risk of adverse psychological outcomes. The dual burden of financial strain and sole parenting responsibilities necessitates reliance on community resources and social support networks to foster coping capacity, resilience, and overall wellbeing. Access to such resources not only mitigates stress but also creates avenues for personal growth and improved mental health.

Government policy represents a critical structural resource for addressing the systemic needs of single-parent families. Policy reforms can align social support mechanisms with the lived realities of these households, thereby alleviating financial pressures and associated psychological distress. Cancian and Meyer (2018) argue that enhancing child support policies for unmarried and low-income parents could parallel the effectiveness of systems available to divorced couples, ensuring equitable care provision and reducing the custodial parent's economic burden. Their work underscores the role of government as a powerful agent in shaping outcomes for single-parent households through targeted interventions. However, while policy reforms offer long-term structural benefits, their impact often depends on effective implementation, equitable access, and the elimination of bureaucratic barriers.

In the digital era, online platforms have emerged as valuable community resources for single parents. Nathawat (2024) examined Reddit as a global support space across the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, and France, employing thematic and sentiment analysis to explore its utility. Findings revealed that such platforms facilitate emotional support, knowledge exchange, and opportunities for self-improvement, while fostering belonging among users facing similar challenges. This underscores the potential of digital communities to bridge geographical and social divides. Nevertheless, reliance on online support may exclude individuals with limited digital literacy or internet access, particularly in low-income contexts, highlighting an accessibility gap.

The challenges of single parenthood are amplified in low- and middle-income countries, where job scarcity, low wages, and high living costs exacerbate chronic stress. Kahindi (2018) investigated the role

of the Christian church as a community resource for single mothers in low-income areas of Nairobi, employing a mixed-methods approach. The church was found to offer counselling, social acceptance, and tangible relief—such as food or financial assistance—thereby counteracting stigma and social isolation. While faith-based organizations can be instrumental in providing psychosocial and material support, their reach and effectiveness may be constrained by doctrinal positions, resource limitations, and the voluntary nature of their services.

Daycare services also play a pivotal role in supporting single parents, particularly those balancing employment with caregiving. Nduku and Wanjiru (2021) found that access to affordable childcare significantly reduces stress levels, a finding echoed by Mbatha et al. (2023), who identified daycares in Nairobi as reliable and safe environments during work hours. These services not only enable economic participation but also contribute to parental mental wellbeing. However, cost, quality, and availability remain pressing concerns, particularly in underserved urban and peri-urban areas.

Collectively, these studies illustrate that the mental wellbeing of single parents is shaped by a complex interplay of structural policies, digital and faith-based support networks, and practical resources such as childcare services. While each of these domains offers unique benefits, their effectiveness is mediated by issues of access, affordability, and inclusivity, necessitating an integrated, multi-level approach to support.

## 1.4 Methodology

### 1.4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **cross-sectional descriptive research design**, which is well-suited for collecting data at a single point in time to describe the characteristics of a specific population or phenomenon (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024). This approach enabled the examination of the relationship between single parents' mental well-being and their socio-economic status in Woodley Ward, Nairobi County, without manipulating variables. The design was particularly appropriate because it allowed for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Moreover, the method is time-efficient, cost-effective, and offers high validity in identifying patterns and trends within a population—making it ideal for achieving the study's objectives (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024).

### 1.4.2 Study Population and Target Population

The target population comprised single parents residing in Woodley Ward, Nairobi County. This group was considered appropriate because their lived experiences directly relate to the research focus on how socio-economic challenges influence mental wellbeing. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, there are approximately 1,000 single-parent families in the ward. Understanding their challenges and coping mechanisms provides valuable insights into the etiological factors affecting their mental health.

### 1.4.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

#### *Sample Size Determination*

The sample size was determined using the Mugenda and Mugenda (2019) formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2} \quad n = d^2 \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

Where:

- $z=1.96$  (95% confidence level)
- $p=0.5$  (proportion of the population with the characteristic)
- $q=1-p=0.5$
- $d=0.05$  (margin of error)

Substituting the values:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5)}{(0.05)^2} = 384$$

Since the target population ( $N=1,000$ ) was below 10,000, Fischer's finite population correction formula was applied

$$n_f = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{n-1}{N}} = \frac{384}{1 + \frac{383}{1000}} \approx 278$$

Thus, the final sample size was 278 participants.

### ***Sampling Technique***

A **simple random sampling** technique was employed to minimize selection bias and maintain methodological rigor (Stratton, 2021). Recruitment was facilitated through the local social service office in Woodley Ward, which regularly engages with single parents. Each identified single parent was assigned a serial number, and every fourth individual was selected to participate. This ensured a randomized selection process while maintaining accessibility.

#### **1.4.4 Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

The primary instrument was a mixed-format questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended items. This format enabled efficient quantitative data collection alongside qualitative insights for richer analysis. Questionnaires were hand-delivered at the local social service office, and structured interviews were also conducted to explore in-depth perspectives on socio-economic challenges and mental well-being. The combination of methods ensured a comprehensive assessment of study variables.

#### **1.4.5 Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in a demographically similar neighboring ward to assess the validity, reliability, and clarity of the questionnaire. Ten percent of the intended sample size was used, selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Participant feedback indicated overall clarity, though minor wording adjustments were made. The instrument's internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.82, indicating high reliability. The average completion time was 25–30 minutes, which informed logistical planning for the main data collection.

#### **1.4.6 Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection involved collaboration with community-based organizations and the local social service center to identify eligible participants. Questionnaires were distributed using a drop-and-pick-later approach, allowing respondents sufficient time to complete them. Trained research assistants assisted in administering both the questionnaires and structured interviews. Data collection commenced only after obtaining all required approvals and permits.



#### 1.4.7 Data Analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns, similarities, and differences in participant narratives (Lochmiller, 2021). Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were processed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics such as mean, median, mode, standard deviation, and percentages applied. Data were presented through tables, pie charts, and graphs, with interpretations aligned to the study objectives.

#### 1.4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent after receiving full disclosure about the research purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by securely storing all data—physical records were kept under lock and key, while electronic files were saved on a password-protected flash drive. Approval for the study was obtained from the University and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), ensuring compliance with regulatory standards.

### 1.5 Results and discussion

#### *Response Rate*

All 278 questionnaires administered were completed and returned, achieving a 100% response rate. Such full participation significantly strengthens the study's reliability, validity, and representativeness, minimizing non-response bias and ensuring that the findings reflect the perspectives of the entire target population. The high response rate can be attributed to deliberate strategies, including clear communication of the study's purpose, obtaining informed consent, and employing trained research assistants to facilitate data collection. These measures enhanced participant trust, reduced attrition, and increased the study's statistical power, thereby lowering the risk of interpretation bias and enabling robust comparisons across subgroups.

#### *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

**Table 1: Demographic Information**

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
<b>Age</b>	15–25 years	10.8	30
	26–35 years	33.1	92
	36–45 years	33.8	94
	46–55 years	14.4	40
	Over 55 years	7.9	22
<b>Gender</b>	Female	80.6	224
	Male	19.4	54
<b>Education Level</b>	Primary	14.0	39
	Secondary	29.9	83
	Diploma	34.2	95
	Bachelor or Higher	21.9	61
<b>Religion</b>	Christian	83.5	232
	Muslim	9.7	27
	Indigenous Religion	1.0	3
	Atheist	2.0	6
	Other	3.8	10

Source: *Field data, 2025*

The majority of respondents were 26–45 years (66.9%), indicating they are in their prime caregiving and economically active years. Only 7.9% were above 55 years, while 10.8% were between 15–25 years. Consistent with global and national patterns, women accounted for 80.6% of single parents. Educational attainment was moderate to high, with 34.2% holding diplomas, 29.9% secondary education, and 21.9% bachelor's degrees or higher—suggesting varying employment and coping capacities. Religion was predominantly Christian (83.5%), with Muslims comprising 9.7%; religious affiliation may shape coping mechanisms and access to support networks.

**Table 2: Disability and Mental Illness**

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
<b>Disability</b>	Yes	2.0	6
	No	98.0	272
<b>Mental Illness</b>	Yes	12.0	33
	No	88.0	245

Source: Field data, 2025

A small proportion (2%) reported having a disability, while 12% indicated a history of mental illness. The latter underscores the need for targeted mental wellbeing interventions for single parents, particularly those within the most economically active age groups.

#### *Availability of Support Systems for Single Parents*

**Table 3: Community Resource Awareness and Access**

Type of Community Resource	Awareness (%)	Access (%)
<b>Day-care services</b>	68.3	31.7
<b>Education bursaries</b>	71.2	46.4
<b>Government/NGO financial support</b>	52.9	22.7
<b>Legal policy/protections</b>	36.0	14.7

Source: Field data, 2025

Findings reveal that education bursaries were the most widely known (71.2%) and accessed (46.4%) resource, while legal policies/protections had the lowest awareness (36%) and access (14.7%). A clear gap exists between awareness and actual utilization of resources, indicating systemic barriers.

#### *Frequency of Access to Community Resources*

**Table 4: Frequency of Access**

Frequency	%	N
<b>Often</b>	18.7	52
<b>Sometimes</b>	47.5	132
<b>Rarely</b>	24.1	67
<b>Never</b>	9.7	27

Source: Field data, 2025

**Figure 4** shows that 66.2% of participants accessed resources often or sometimes, while 33.8% reported rare or no access—limiting problem-solving capacity and increasing stress.



***Emotional Support from Friends and Family*****Table 5: Availability of Friends/Family**

Response	%	N
Strongly Agree	11.8	33
Agree	29.2	81
Neutral	21.7	60
Disagree	28.0	78
Strongly Disagree	8.3	23

Source: Field data, 2025

Only 41% reported having reliable emotional support, with 59% indicating limited or no such networks, pointing to risks of social isolation.

***Impact of Strong Support Systems*****Table 6: Effect on Confidence**

Response	%	N
Strongly Agree	65.0	181
Agree	33.0	91
Neutral	1.0	3
Disagree	1.0	3
Strongly Disagree	0.0	0

Source: Field data, 2025

An overwhelming 98% agreed that strong support systems enhance parental confidence.

***Impact of Lack of Support on Mental Wellbeing*****Table 7: Negative Impact**

Response	%	N
Strongly Agree	40.0	111
Agree	22.6	63
Neutral	24.0	67
Disagree	8.4	23
Strongly Disagree	5.0	14

Source: Field data, 2025

Overall, 62.6% recognized the negative mental health impacts of inadequate support.

***Perceived Value of Support Systems*****Table 8: Value Perception**

Response	%	N
Yes	87.8	244
No	12.2	34

Source: Field data, 2025

Figure 8 shows most participants valued support systems for mental health benefits.

### **Summary**

While awareness of resources such as day-care (68.3%) and bursaries (71.2%) is relatively high, access is markedly lower (31.7% and 46.4%, respectively). Legal protections and financial aid are the least accessible ( $\leq 23\%$ ). Only two-thirds use community resources regularly, and 59% lack adequate emotional support, heightening vulnerability to mental distress. However, nearly all respondents acknowledge the importance of support systems in fostering resilience, confidence, and positive mental health outcomes. Strengthening access, particularly to underutilized resources, is essential for reducing stress and improving single-parent wellbeing.

### **1.6 Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the mental well-being of single parents in Woodly Ward, Nairobi County, is significantly shaped by socio-economic factors, availability of support systems, and coping strategies. Income levels and coping mechanisms emerged as the strongest positive predictors of mental health, while a higher number of dependents exerted a negative influence. Access to stable support systems substantially improved well-being, underscoring the critical role of both formal and informal networks in mitigating psychological distress. These findings align with ecological systems theory and the transactional theory of stress and coping, highlighting the interplay between individual resilience and the surrounding socio-environmental context. The evidence affirms the need for integrated, community-based interventions that combine economic empowerment, mental health services, and strengthened social support structures to improve outcomes for single parents. By addressing these determinants holistically, policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders can create a sustainable framework that fosters mental well-being and resilience among single-parent households.

### **1.7 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, improving awareness, accessibility, and utilization of support systems for single parents in Woodly Ward, Nairobi City County, is essential for enhancing their mental well-being. The following recommendations are proposed:

#### ***Strengthen Community Resource Accessibility***

- **What:** Expand the reach of affordable day-care services, bursaries, legal aid, and financial support programs for single parents.
- **Who Implements:** Nairobi County Government (Department of Social Services), in partnership with NGOs such as FIDA Kenya and Plan International.
- **How:** Increase funding allocations for community-based centers, set up mobile outreach desks in markets, churches, and schools, and digitize application processes to make resources easier to access.

#### ***Integrate Mental Health Support into Community Services***

- **What:** Embed counseling and peer-support programs within community health centers.
- **Who Implements:** Ministry of Health (Mental Health Department), County Health Teams, and trained community health volunteers (CHVs).
- **How:** Provide mental health awareness workshops, train CHVs in basic psychosocial support, and establish peer-led support groups for single parents.

#### ***Strengthen Informal Support Networks***

- **What:** Build and sustain friendship, family, and neighbor-based networks to address emotional isolation.

- **Who Implements:** Faith-based organizations, local administration (chiefs and assistant chiefs), and community-based organizations (CBOs).
- **How:** Facilitate structured mentorship programs pairing experienced parents with newly single parents, and host monthly social events to encourage bonding.

#### ***Increase Legal Literacy and Protection Awareness***

- **What:** Improve understanding of existing laws, rights, and protections for single parents.
- **Who Implements:** Kenya Legal and Ethical Issues Network on HIV & AIDS (KELIN), FIDA Kenya, pro-bono lawyers, and the Judiciary's public education units.
- **How:** Conduct periodic legal aid clinics in the ward, develop simplified Swahili/vernacular legal guides, and leverage radio talk shows to reach a broader audience.

#### ***Establish a Single Parents Resource Hub***

- **What:** Create a physical and online hub where single parents can access consolidated information on resources, training, and mental health support.
- **Who Implements:** Nairobi County Government in partnership with private tech companies and donor agencies such as USAID or UN Women.
- **How:** Develop an interactive website and a small office in the ward where trained officers provide resource linkage, case management, and referrals.

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