



## Single Mothers Challenges in Mizo Society

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### Abstract

*The responsibility of nurturing children for a mother or a father alone is undoubtedly a mounting task to discharge. Single mother specifically, is considered to be facing greater degrees of obstacles because the complete weight of parenting and income falls solely on one individual along with different socio-psychological challenges in the society. This study identified and examined the issues that single mothers encounter and highlighted their significance in Mizo society. The study reveals economic hardships, as the biggest challenge. From the responses, a single mother's emotional well-being has been significantly hampered by her single status; consequently, the vast majority of single mothers avoid social activities and maintain less contact with friends and neighbours following the divorce or death of their spouse. For the most part, they've managed to raise their children even though they've faced numerous challenges along the way.*

**Keywords:** Single Mother, Mizo Society, Challenges, Coping Strategy.

### Introduction

A single mother is a mother who have a dependent child or dependent children and who is widowed, divorced or unmarried. It can be defined as a mother who lives with the child or children without the husband or partner. A single mother can be a widowed or a married woman separated from her husband or a divorcee or an unwed mother. In other words, single mothers referred to unwed mothers, deserted wives, or widows (Brady, 2007).

One of the most startling demographic changes in recent decades has been the rapid increase in single-parent families (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Norton & Glick, 1986). The vast majority of these families are headed by women, and lone mothers with dependent children are the poorest of all demographic groups. Single mothers face the problems of parenting alone while simultaneously coping with inadequate income in rearing their families (Belle, 1982; Mulroy, 1988). Having children often limits employment opportunities,

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resulting in greater poverty (Downey & Moen, 1987). The many parenting demands and the inability to meet all of them lead to role strain and feelings of being overwhelmed, exhausted, and inadequate (Koeske & Koeske, 1990). In addition to financial hardships, single motherhood is associated with social and psychological deprivations. Due to patriarchy and social debasement, single mothers are found to have a plethora of problems all over the world.

In Mizo society, the number of single mothers is large and anticipated to rise further. As per the 2011 Indian Census, Mizoram records the highest number of divorced women in the state. Problems of single mothers vary according to the nature of the singlehood and the support system received by them. Often deserted in life and ignored by society, such state of affairs confronted by such women need to be considered cautiously. These predominant challenges need to be addressed from the grassroots level. In addition, the growing number of single mothers among the Mizo society and the ultimate reasons behind the shutter too needs thorough investigation.

### **Mizoram**

Mizoram is located in the north-eastern part of the country and is bounded by Myanmar (Burma) to the east and south and Bangladesh to the west and by the states of Tripura to the northwest, Assam to the north, and Manipur to the northeast. In 1972 it became a centrally administered union territory under the name of Mizoram, and in 1987 it achieved statehood. The Mizos make up the majority of the population in Mizoram, which is divided into three autonomous district councils: Lai Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council, and Chakma Autonomous District Council. The term “Mizo” is a collective name for the people inhabiting Mizoram, possessing one language, same origin and a common way of life.

Mizos being patriarchal, the property is inherited by men and practice male ultimogeniture. Traditionally polygamy was allowed, but monogamy has been strictly enforced by the various churches. Mizos are a close-knit society and there are no differences in class and no discrimination on grounds of sex. The total population of Mizoram according to the 2011 census is 10,97, 206 males constituting 5,55,339 and female 5,41,867. The great majority of the populations are Christian in various denominations, predominantly Presbyterian and scheduled tribes occupying Mizoram in the majority. Christianity plays an important role in shaping the socio-cultural life of the people of the state. The Mizo tribe belongs to the mongoloid race and linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are:

- a. To examine the various kinds of economic challenges faced by single mothers
- b. To examine the types of emotional challenges faced by single mothers
- c. To identify the social challenges faced by single mothers and the coping strategy adopted to overcome these challenges.

## Methodology

A sample of 100 single mothers for different categories of singlehood was identified by adopting a purposeful and snowball sampling method. Purposeful sampling occurs when participants are purposefully chosen to participate in a study (Morse & Richards, 2002). Snowball sampling is a method when already identified candidates were asked for referrals to gain further participants. The sample consists of single mothers who are widows, divorcees and unwed mothers who at least have one dependent child below 18 years of age. Semi-structured schedules were executed and various observations were also recorded mainly based on the interview method. The respondents were given prior information and house visits were conducted to elicit the required information accordingly. Aizawl was chosen for the present study. Aizawl being the capital of the state and keeping in view its geographical expanse, the incidence of this category of single women, as desired for the study, is higher than any other area of Mizoram.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 illustrates the single mother's age, educational status, occupational status, the number of children and family characteristics- like the head, the total number of household members. According to the study, 52 per cent of the mothers belonged to the age group of 30-40 years, 30 per cent belonged to the age group of 20-30 years and 18 per cent of the mothers were above 40 years. Single mothers in the present study acquired single status at the peak of their lives. This enforced them a new role to which they were required to adjust which is a matter of great concern.

Table 1: Background of the Single Mother

Sl/No.	Responses	No	Percentage
1	Age		
	20-30	30	30
	30-40	52	52
	Above 40 Years	18	18
2	Qualification		
	a) Less than High School	34	34
	b) High School	19	19
	c) Higher Secondary	13	13
	Graduate	19	19
	Post Graduate	11	11
	Professional Course	4	4
3	Occupational Status		
	Govt. employed	11	11
	Self-employed	51	51
	Unemployed	38	38
4	No. of Children		

	1	43	43
	2-3	46	46
	Above 4	11	11
5	Family Characteristics		
I	Family Head		
	Self	35	35
	Father	31	31
	Mother	20	20
	Others	14	14
II	Total No of Household members		
	Below 3	16	16
	4-6 Members	62	62
	7-10 Members	20	20
	Above 10	2	2

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

The educational attainment of a woman plays an important part in determining her standard of living, socio-cultural status and esteem accorded her by society. Educational status can, therefore, be considered as a useful index to the socio-economic position of an individual (Barooah, 1993). According to table 1, 34 per cent of the single mothers in the sample unit are below high school standards. About per cent are high school passed, 13 per cent are higher secondary passed, 19 per cent were Graduate, and 11 per cent single mothers have completed post-graduation level. It is also found that 4 per cent of single mothers have finished professional courses. Educational attainment influences their outlook, attitudes, and capacity for adjustment to many demands of their circumstances. Occupation is an important indicator of socio-economic status. The present study shows that 51 per cent of the respondents were self-employed, 38 per cent were unemployed and dependent on their parents, and a few (11 per cent) of the respondents were government employed. According to the data in the preceding table, 43 per cent of respondents have 1-2 children, while 46 per cent of respondents have 2-3 children. It is also discovered that 11 per cent of the respondents have more than four children.

The study indicates that the majority of single mothers have living arrangements in parental houses as it offers the best possible way in terms of security, economic viability and comfort. About 31 per cent of the households were headed by the respondent's father and 20 per cent by the respondent's mother. Most of them are divorced and unwed single mothers. 35 per cent of the respondent's households were headed by the respondents themselves. Most such women are widows. Often a widow inherits a house built by her husband, but a divorced woman gets almost nothing from her husband. Another 14 per cent of the respondents continue to live with their in-laws (in case of the widow) or any other relatives. In Mizo society, an unmarried woman is not expected to leave her parents' home until she marries and typically remain to live with their parents and do not feel the need to live on their own. A widow may or may not stay in her husband's house after the death of her husband. But it is

customary to remain in the house of her dead-husband for at least three months till the lamentation ceremony (*Thlahual*) is over (Sen, 1992).

Table 2: Distribution of Marital Status of the respondents

SN	Description	No	Percentage
1	Widowed	37	37.0
2	Divorced	44	44.0
3	Unwed	19	19.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 2 represents that there are 44 per cent divorced mothers, 37 per cent widowed mothers and the rest 19 per cent unwed mothers exist in the sample area. These categories for single mothers have been identified based on a primary survey. The maximum percentage is for divorced mothers. This is because the divorce rate is much higher among the single mothers studied, i.e. single mothers living with independent children below the age of 18. Another category is for widowed i.e. 37 per cent. The incidence of widowhood rises sharply with age. A small minority of men are widowed, while a large majority of women are widowed. The main reason for this gender gap in the incidence of widowhood and divorce is a much higher rate of remarriage among widowed men and divorced men, compared with widowed and divorce. The third category is for unwed mothers who are a minority in comparison to other categories. The stigma of unwed motherhood is pervasive across all classes, castes, races and levels of education in India. There has been a growing trend of children born outside marriage; a societal trend that was virtually unheard of decades ago. Similarly, in Mizo society, pregnancy out of wedlock is not uncommon.

### **Economic Challenges faced by Single Mothers**

The economic problem is a standing situation with most single mothers. Although many single mothers who live below the poverty line were poor before becoming single mothers, a sizable majority became poor at the time of marital disruption. There is difficulty in meeting the basic needs of children such as clothing, school fees, maintaining the previous standard of living inclusive of personal expenses. Data is also collected to determine information regarding the source of income, financial problems faced by single mothers, aid received during emergencies/financial crises, a problem faced in getting accommodation, etc.

Table 3: Respondents source of income (Multiple Responses)

SN	Source of Income	No	Percentage
1.	Self-Employed	63	63.0
2.	Pension	13	13.0
3.	Family Credit	51	51.0
4.	Income from Rental Property	4	4.0
5.	Other kinds of allowances	4	4.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

As it is observed from table 3, 63 per cent of the respondent's source of income was earned from employment or self-employed. A great number 51 per cent of the respondent's source of income was from family credit and 13 per cent of the respondents depend on pension. For 4 per cent and another 4 per cent of the respondent's source of income was rented property and other kinds of regular allowance.

Table 4: Financial difficulties faced as a single mother (Multiple Responses)

Sl.No.	Financial Difficulties	No	Percentage
1.	Maintain the same standard	39	39.0
2.	Meet Daily Expenses	55	55.0
3.	Educate Children	45	45.0
4.	Medical Expense	17	17.0
5.	Rent	4	4.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

As it is observed from table 4, 55 per cent of the mother's faces financial problems after becoming single to meet the daily expense of their family and for themselves. 45 per cent of the mother's problem was to provide education to the children. It is difficult to manage educational expenses. 39 per cent of the respondents stated that it was difficult to maintain the same standard and they have to limit their living expenses. 17 per cent of the respondents faced difficulties in providing proper medical facilities to their children and only 4 per cent of the respondents have problems in paying house rent.

Table 5: Rent Accommodation Problem

SN	Responses	No	Percentage
1	Yes	8	8.0
2	No	92	92.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 5 shows that 92 per cent of respondents have no trouble finding housing, and the vast majority of respondents have returned to their parent's home or continue to live with their in-laws in the case of widows; unwed mothers have not considered living separately from their parents. Lokshin, Harris, and Popkin's (2000) studies on single mothers and their household coping strategy with poverty showed that many single mothers co-reside with relatives or other adults to cope with economic hardships. Those residing independently are more likely to face greater economic insecurity for their earnings alone has to support the household. Only 8 per cent of respondents reported having difficulties finding accommodation. According to the findings of the study, single mothers face difficulties in obtaining rented housing because there aren't enough houses available at a reasonable rent that are within their financial means, and they are also generally unwelcome by the landlords themselves.

### Emotional Challenges faced by Single Mother

A single mother may experience a good deal of stress due to income insecurity and lack of social integration, lack of confidence after becoming single. It has been observed that the emotional life of the single mothers who earlier had associated with that of their husbands was also greatly affected by their single status. Single mothers appear to have reasonable access to family or social support, yet they are notably disadvantaged for psychological resources, as documented by studies of depression and psychological well-being (McLanahan and Booth, 1989). Data were collected to determine information regarding immediate emotional experience following singlehood, present emotional experience, challenges faced in raising children as a single mother.

On questioning the feeling, they immediately encountered after being single, table 6 demonstrates that 55 per cent of the respondents suffered loneliness after divorce/widowhood, 59 per cent of the respondents felt insecure, 55 per cent of the respondents stated that they lack confidence in dealing with the new challenges of life. 6 per cent of the respondents felt a lack of identity and thought their life was no longer meaningful. 7 per cent of divorced respondents even felt suicidal at one point in time as they have been abandoned by their husbands. 42 per cent of the single mothers felt a big burden and at times do not want to carry on a normal life. The study revealed that most widows suffered traumatic grief because of the early death of their husbands. 18 per cent of the respondent was relieved after divorce/separation as they undergo marital tensions and were subjected to physical and emotional torture by their husbands.

Table 6: Immediate reaction/feeling at the time of single (Multiple Responses)

Sl.No.	Immediate Reaction	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Loneliness	55	55.0
2.	Insecure	59	59.0
3.	Lack of Confidence	55	55.0
4.	Lack of identity	26	26.0
5.	Suicidal	7	7.0
6.	Relieved	18	18.0
7.	Burden	42	42.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

Some single mothers felt relieved after the divorce/separation although financially and emotionally they might have gone through a difficult period showing that there is a limit to which women can tolerate evils like domestic violence and alcoholism (Mookharjee *et al.*, 2011). The situation is similar for a few widows; because their alcoholic husband only caused them sorrow and turmoil in the family, their absence is somewhat of a relief to them. As a result, they are mentally prepared for the upcoming stage of life, with all of its challenges.



Table 7: Present emotional experience of the respondents (Multiple Responses)

Sl.No.	Current Feelings	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Loneliness	20	20.0
2.	Insecure	17	17.0
3.	Lack of Confidence	10	10.0
4.	Lack of identity	6	6.0
5.	Decrease status in the family	9	9.0
6.	Got used	53	53.0
7.	Relieved	59	59.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 7 depicts single mothers' current emotional experiences. As can be seen, approximately 53 per cent of the respondents stated that they had grown accustomed to living alone. 59 per cent of respondents reported feeling relieved. Approximately 9 per cent of the respondent's report that their family status has deteriorated as a result of their single status. Only 20 per cent of respondent's report continuing loneliness after years of being single, and only 17 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively, report continuing insecurities and lack of confidence. According to the findings of the study, single mothers learn to adapt to their circumstances and improve their performance over time.

Table 8: Problem faced in raising children as a single mother (Multiple Responses)

S.No.	Problems in Raising Children	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Lack of quality time	38	38.0
2.	Lack of attention checking ill habits	22	22.0
3.	Lack of attention towards education	13	13.0
4.	Discipline Children	50	50.0
5.	Financial Difficulties	37	37.0
6.	Providing emotional support	36	36.0
7.	No Problem	7	7.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

To find out the various facets of the problem faced by single mothers in raising children single-handed, table 8 shows that 50 per cent i.e. half of the respondents most pressing problem is to maintain discipline among the children due to the absence of male counterparts. They felt that their children were out of control and were not responding to their parenting with the absence of a father. 38 per cent of the respondents depict a lack of quality time for their children. The mothers found it difficult to coach them in their studies and provide enough time as they have to engage themselves to work to support them. 36 per cent of the respondents stated that they are unable to provide emotional support, helping them in their proper growth and development. Only a per cent of the respondents stated that they have not faced any difficulties in raising children alone. This is the case of single mothers whose children are still small and hence the needs are minimal and manageable for the present and



disciplining the children aren't a problem. It has been observed that respondents who have an adequate financial backup can get over the feeling of apprehension and emotional strain to a larger extent. These mothers are employed with secure jobs or have good familial support.

### **Social Challenges Faced by Single Mother**

Single mothers are often isolated and placed under several restrictions even in an educated civilized society. Their needs are marginalised in society and they are not taken into the mainstream. At times single mothers develop low self-esteem and loss of self-identity. They face many hurdles concerning participating in social gatherings as they always lead to unpleasant experiences due to the callous attitudes of others towards them. They hesitate to make new friends and suffer always from a lack of companionship. No single woman can escape the social stigma that is attached to her by society. Due to the deeply rooted gender hierarchy of the Indian culture, women are considered secondary objects and this gender hierarchy is observed in the family as well as in society too (Anji and Velumani, 2013). Data were collected to determine information regarding the participation of single mothers in social activities, about their changes in contact with friends/neighbours, about their opinion on how society treats single mothers and about whether or not they have been subjected to sexual harassment.

Table 9: Participation of the respondents in social activities

Sl.No.	Responses	No	Percentage
1	Regularly	13	13.0
2	Occasionally	51	51.0
3	Never	36	36.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

According to table 9, only 13 per cent of the respondents participated regularly in social activities. These mothers stated that their single status did not affect their participation in social activities and are capable of compensating for the absence of their husbands by doing so. 51 per cent of the respondents occasionally participated in social functions according to their time of convenience. 36 per cent of the single mother understudy stated that they never attended any social functions after they became single due to the feeling of low self-esteem, lack of time and hesitation to meet people.

Table 10: Respondents change in contact with friends/neighbours

Sl.No.	Responses	No	Percentage
1	More	31	31.0
2	Less	52	52.0
3	Moderate	17	17.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

As it is observed from table 10, about 52 per cent of the respondents have lesser contact with friends and neighbours after they became single. 17 per cent of the respondents continue to maintain moderate contact with friends and neighbours. The study observed that 31 percent of the respondents socialize more with friends and neighbours after they became single.

Table 11: Respondents opinion towards own status in society

Sl.No.	Responses	No	Percentage
1	Yes	28	28.0
2	No	72	72.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

Table 11 shows that 28 per cent of respondents believe they are neglected by society as a result of their single status. On the other hand, 72 per cent of respondents did not feel neglected by society as a result of their single status. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents stated that, while society may not neglect or treat them differently, they frequently developed an unwelcome feeling in society. It has been observed that young single mothers are more vulnerable to these types of feelings than older single mothers.

Table 12: If experienced sexual harassment

Sl.No.	Responses	No	Percentage
1	Yes	18	18.0
2	No	82	82.0
	Total	100	100.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

In addition, respondents were asked if they had ever been the victim of sexual harassment. As illustrated in table 12, only 18 per cent of respondents reported having encountered sexual harassment in their neighbourhood or place of employment. Most incidents are minor and can be easily worked out or dismissed by most respondents as something that happens regularly. The majority 82 per cent of the respondents have not experienced any type of harassment as a result of their single status.

### **Coping Strategies adopted by Single Mothers**

The coping strategies of the poor-single mother were seen from combinations of various methods of emotional and material support like friends, family members, faith spirituality, etc. Data were collected to determine the coping strategies adopted by single mothers to overcome the hardships faced as single mothers. When faced with adversity, table 13 shows that 65 per cent of respondents turn to prayer for relief; the majority of single mothers seek assistance and rely on God in times of extreme difficulty, and 36 per cent of respondents attempted to maintain a positive attitude because they believed it was the only alternative open to them. 28 per cent of those who responded said they tried to keep

themselves occupied by socialising more, and another 6 per cent said they avoided social interaction because it made their situation worse and that they dealt with their problems on their own.

Table 13: Coping strategies adopted to overcome difficulties (Multiple Responses)

Sl.No.	Coping Strategies	N0	Percentage
1.	Socialize	28	28.0
2.	Avoidance	6	6.0
3.	Relaxation	17	17.0
4.	Praying	65	65.0
5.	Professional help	8	8.0
6.	Positive Thinking	36	36.0
7.	Alcohol/Drugs	8	8.0
8.	Insoluble	4	4.0

\*Source: Fieldwork 2018

## Conclusion

Single parenting requires the dual roles on the responsibility that may have been shared by their spouse and experience additional role strain as a parent. Many women became single at their youthful years that impose a new role in which they are required to adjust. More than half of the single mothers under study were self-employed, some engaged in daily wage labourers, vegetable vendors, skilled workers, small scale businesses, private teachers and a few work in the professional sector. They work under considerable stress without having job satisfaction to earn their livelihood. However, poverty and economic instability are not the only sources of strain in mother-only families. Besides low wages, another major barrier to employment for most mothers is child care. They are also facing difficulty in disciplining and providing enough time for their children. The vast majority of the widow, divorcees and unwed mothers tackle various types of personal and emotional challenges. The study analysed that various factors compelled them to remain single. Be it widowed, divorced or unwed mother, the adjustability with the altering social circumstances is a challenging task. In Mizo society, a husband can divorce his wife anytime. Even though the customary law allows both men and women to initiate divorce, women in actuality avoid divorce as it is usually in their being married that they gain their identity, security and respect from society (Gangte, 2016). Moreover, divorce women and unwed mothers are a victim of economic and social insecurity. In general, men face relatively fewer problems as compared to women folks. Men may be economically independent yet child care poses no great problem where their wife continues to look after the children even without significant income.

The support of familial and other kin plays a vital role in supporting an individual in Mizo society. The study indicates that familial relatives offer a single mother a potential source of support economically and emotionally in her changing situation. The result also indicates that the majority of the single mothers coped up with their personal and emotional challenges mostly in prayers and maintaining a positive attitude in times of hardships.

The study revealed that the biggest challenge faced by each category of a single mother is mainly economic hardships. Problems of the single mother are also linked to the upbringing of children, psycho-social adjustment with her own family or society, their future and settling down in life. Among the single mothers, the most vulnerable groups are those who have been living alone with dependent children. The participation of single mothers in social gatherings/functions and church activities gradually decreases after their husband's demise. The studies conclude that on average, every aspect of a single mother's life is problematic. The existence of a large gender gap in the Mizo customary laws of marriage, divorce and inheritance due to a rigid patriarchal attitude towards women is accountable for the inferior status of single mothers in the society. Despite the challenges they have faced in their everyday life, single mothers worked hard and tried their best to look after their children. Thus, single mothers in Mizo society deserve appropriate attention, need interventions and strategies to improve their economic, emotional and social outcomes in the future.

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