



Unexpected shift in marital relationship: Stress and coping strategies among single mothers in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigated the unexpected shift in marital relationships: stress and coping strategies among single mothers in Nigeria. This category of people has been neglected in the background in the scheme of events in Nigeria, and it is alarming that this neglect affects the mental health of single mothers.

Method – This qualitative research adopted an interpretive research paradigm. Data were gathered from fifteen (15) single mothers using semi-structured interviews between November 2024 and February 2025. Collected data was deductively analysed based on recurring themes relating to stress and coping strategies of single mothers who were once in a marital relationship.

Result – The study found that financial constraints, stigmatization, disinheritance, and assault were the major stressors confronting the well-being of single mothers in Nigeria. In a bid to cope with the breasting adversities negatively affecting single mothers, this study found the exploration of formal and informal support networks, faith-based religious support, remarriage, and seeking therapeutic intervention as coping mechanisms employed by single mothers.

Implication – The government, psychologists/therapists, and relevant stakeholders raise awareness of the availability of counselling services that can assist single mothers in overcoming unexpected challenges.

Originality/Value – This study considers single mothers living in remote areas, unemployed, on low incomes, and engaged in menial work. By addressing this knowledge gap, professional counsellors, scholars, religious groups, government support groups, Non-governmental organisations, tiers of government, single mothers, and policymakers will greatly benefit from this study.

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Kata Kunci:

Perubahan tak terduga, hubungan pernikahan, stres, strategi penanggulangan, dan ibu tunggal.

Abstract

Tujuan – Studi ini menyelidiki pergeseran tak terduga dalam hubungan pernikahan: stres dan strategi penanggulangan di kalangan ibu tunggal di Nigeria. Kelompok masyarakat ini telah diabaikan dalam skema peristiwa di Nigeria, dan mengkhawatirkan bahwa pengabaian ini berdampak pada kesehatan mental ibu tunggal.

Metode – Penelitian kualitatif ini mengadopsi paradigma penelitian interpretatif. Data dikumpulkan dari lima belas (15) ibu tunggal melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur antara November 2024 dan Februari 2025. Data yang dikumpulkan dianalisis secara deduktif berdasarkan tema-tema yang berulang terkait stres dan strategi koping ibu tunggal yang pernah berada dalam hubungan pernikahan.

Hasil – Studi ini menemukan bahwa kendala finansial, stigmatisasi, pengucilan warisan, dan kekerasan merupakan faktor stres utama yang mengancam kesejahteraan ibu tunggal di Nigeria. Dalam upaya mengatasi kesulitan yang berdampak negatif pada ibu tunggal, studi ini menemukan bahwa eksplorasi jaringan dukungan formal dan informal, dukungan keagamaan berbasis keyakinan, pernikahan kembali, dan mencari intervensi terapeutik merupakan mekanisme koping yang digunakan oleh ibu tunggal.

Implikasi – Pemerintah, psikolog/terapis, dan pemangku kepentingan terkait perlu meningkatkan kesadaran tentang ketersediaan layanan konseling yang dapat membantu ibu tunggal mengatasi tantangan tak terduga.

Orisinalitas/Nilai – Studi ini mempertimbangkan ibu tunggal yang tinggal di daerah terpencil, pengangguran, berpenghasilan rendah, dan bekerja di bidang pekerjaan kasar. Dengan mengatasi kesenjangan pengetahuan ini, konselor profesional, akademisi, kelompok agama, kelompok dukungan pemerintah, organisasi non-pemerintah, tingkatan pemerintah, ibu tunggal, dan pembuat kebijakan akan sangat diuntungkan dari studi ini.

Introduction

Marriage is an important aspect of human relationships, promoting full expression of sexual intimacy, procreation, companionship, and the establishment of in-law relationships. Marriage has been described as a fundamental human alliance (Okojide et al., 2023); a socially recognised relationship with at least two people (Fatima & Alim, 2018); and a means of facilitating family connections that began generations ago (Nadar, 2018). Marriage in the African context is a lifelong relationship that connects not only the couple but also relatives, extended families, and kinsmen. Ejeh (2022) affirmed that establishing marriage is embedded in important terms such as sacred institution, spiritual relationship, emotional alliance, physical attachment, commitment, and consecrated union. Marriage has been described as a means of maintaining people's lifeline, an avenue with religious, legal, cultural, and social backing (Ayodabo, 2022): to enjoy companionship, sexual gratification, raise offspring, love, and be happy.

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Despite the importance of marital relationships, young single mothers are numerous in Nigeria. The high rate of families headed by single mothers in Africa is alarming (Ayebe et al., 2022). Beyond Africa's continental concern, single parenthood is a source of worry across the globe, with over 22% of the female population being single, experiencing negative outcomes and poverty (Ntoimo & Chadoka, 2019); not to mention various kinds of social problems confronting children raised by single mothers (Adejoh et al., 2019). Death is an inevitable separative circumstance that everyone, whether young or old, must experience. When death takes away the husband, the identity and everything about the life of the surviving woman suddenly change from blissful to forlorn. The death of the husband announces interminable departure; psycho-sexual problems to the surviving wife (Akinduyo, 2014); many burdens (Dube, 2023); economic disaster (Laurence, 2020); considerable life adjustments (Sekgobela et al., 2020), and severe grief (Chami & Pooley, 2021). Every couple never expected or wished for separation due to its psychological turmoil, in-laws' interference, exploitation, bereavement, mourning rites (Amoo et al., 2022); conjugal deprivation and marital severance (Gass, 1987).

Apart from the death of the father, single motherhood (SM) could be caused by so many personal, unplanned, attitudinal, environmental, and economic factors. Golombok et al. (2022) posited that a certain population of single mothers was a result of personal choice to raise children alone, determination to have offspring from unintended pregnancies, and artificial insemination or donor conception. In addition, children of single mothers by choice might not be aware of their fathers' identity, and that does not negatively affect their psychological well-being (Golombok et al., 2022). Factors such as passivity, domestic violence, conflict, maltreatment, illiteracy, and insubordination were found to destabilize conjugal marital relationships (Mutalibovna, 2022). Determinants such as divorce, widowhood, and infidelity have been the major issues disparagingly affecting family stability in Nigeria (Chizomam & Nyasha, 2019); poor financial status, lack of time for marital relationships, problems from extended family, incessant conflicts, and issues relating to health were found to cause single motherhood (Jeanfreau et al., 2020). Sexual dysfunction among married couples was described as a factor causing marital instability (Akinduyo & Ojewola, 2016); this probably leads to the separation of couples, resulting in single motherhood syndrome (SMS) in Nigeria.

Reliable sources, including scientific observations, legal proceedings, and media outlets, affirmed that, in the course of fulfilling marital roles or duties across different cultural backgrounds, marriages experienced instability (Olofintoye & Faluyi, 2020). As reported by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (2016), in every five families, one was headed by a single mother, exposing them to vulnerability in society (Hübgen, 2020). According to Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009), 70 percent of families headed by single parents were women stressed with decision making, children's discipline, emotional stress, and loneliness. Single mother's syndrome (SMS) changes the original family structure of togetherness, companionship, and joint burden-lifting to loneliness syndrome (LS), especially among the young single mothers. Adolescents raised by single mothers (SM) were reported to exhibit high depression, psychopathological and negative behaviours (Daryanai et al., 2024); with inability to promptly pay children's school fees, poor socialization, neglect, and poor academic performance (Abdulkadir et al., 2023).

In comparison, single mothers' parenthood (SMP) has a serious negative socio-economic effect than single fathers' parenthood (SFP) across the globe (Heine, 2016). These include deprivation of various privileges (Halwiindi, 2023); impoverished nutrition and high mortality rate (Tette et al., 2016); work-life conflicts with family affairs and/or domestic chores stress (Gasse & Mortelmans, 2022); lower quality of life (Kim & Kim, 2020); poor psychological health and relationships (Li, 2020) are major unhoped for, reverberations stressing single mothers daily. Single mothers face untold hardship daily, making them experience increased vulnerability, with their stress under-reported across different societies. As observed, Nigerian cultural practices have indirectly deprived women of their many fundamental rights and exposed them to all sorts of stress.

Mbanjwa and Harvey (2023) investigated the experiences of single mothers training children with disability in South Africa. The study used a qualitative design to investigate the factors that contextually determined the experiences of single mothers (SM) heading families and raising disabled children alone. The study identified multiple stressors (e.g., emotional and financial challenges) confronted single mothers raising children with disability confronted. Daryanani et al. (2016) assessed the relationship between single-mother parenting and adolescent psychopathology. The study found that single mothers (SM) were reported to exhibit negative parenting attitudes, had poor financial status, which predicted adolescents' psychopathology. Ségeral (2020) examined single mothering during the pandemic, drawing on 5 years of personal experience, including raising children. The study found that single mothers have been marginalized, especially during the pandemic era. Ayebeng et al. (2022) assessed the trends and demographic data of single motherhood in Ghana from 1993 to 2014. The study found that, for various reasons, the number of single mothers (SM) in Ghana has increased over the past 10 years.

For single mothers to traverse single motherhood's stress, coping strategies become crucial to their well-being. In this context, coping strategies describe the embedded traits, behaviours, and attitudes in the form of a support system that assist single mothers (SM) in weathering the storm of challenges affecting their psychological well-being. Labrague et al. (2017) affirmed that coping strategies are necessary to deal with stress, buffer problems, and aid individuals in seeking support systems for their comfort. Abouammoh et al. (2022) explained that coping strategies, as theorized by Folkman and Lazarus (1984), included the unceasing coordination of both cognitive and behavioural energy, helping to survive stress emanating from both internal and external adversities.

Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) reported that coping theory assumed that coping with stress is focus-based (i.e., the individual's own support systems in navigating stress) and approach-based (i.e., the tangibility of coping strategies in producing positive outcomes).

Ahmada (2018) explored the self-coping mechanisms of single mothers to achieve financial security. The quantitative study aimed to inquire into the challenges facing individuals due to divorce, disability, and the death of a spouse. Self-coping strategies were mostly used by single mothers to mitigate the effects of financial stress. Maness and Munoz (2019) explored the coping mechanisms used by single mothers in their studies for higher education. The qualitative study employed the interview method to collect data from the participants. Financial support, time management, caring for the children, and support systems were identified as recurring themes, in addition to maladaptive and adaptive coping mechanisms. Literature on the stress and coping strategies of single mothers in Nigeria and Africa at large is grossly under-investigated. As far as I know, the neglect of the high population of single mothers is alarming. This study aimed to investigate the stressors and coping strategies of single mothers in Nigeria. Two questions guided this study: What stressors confront single mothers in Nigeria? What are the strategies reported by single mothers in coping with adversities?

Stress and coping strategies have been studied, but these studies failed to account for Nigeria's current economic realities. Inflation is high, the unemployment rate among single mothers is not considered, and culturally ingrained stress factors have been neglected. More so, previous studies under-investigated how culturally deep-seated factors shape single mothers' ways of surviving adversities. This study considers single mothers living in remote areas, unemployed, on low incomes, and engaged in menial work. By addressing this knowledge gap, professional counsellors, scholars, religious groups, government support groups, Non-governmental organisations, tiers of government, single mothers, and policymakers will greatly benefit from this study.

Single parenting, also known as solo parenting, is an ancient adversity that exposes children to risky behaviours and social problems (John & Shimfe, 2020). Single motherhood (SM) is a situation where the husband and wife are no longer living together as a couple due to circumstances of death, barrenness, divorce, infidelity, lack of trust, among others, which predispose the mothers to different stress and compounded responsibilities.

Across the globe, the sudden demise of a husband is laced with many stressors, such as psychological, spiritual, ill-health, and general negative impacts on women (Doherty & Scannell-Desch, 2022); changing a woman's life experience to a traumatic one, especially for young widows (Lamba, 2023). The death of a husband in any marital relationship causes derangement in blissful living, companionship, well-being, and the achievement of both long-term and short-term goals. The death of a young husband is never a good experience; it immediately changes a woman's status to both widowhood and single motherhood (SM). Lamba (2023) affirmed that whenever death strikes in marriage, death exposes the surviving wife to disagreeable experiences such as loneliness, grief, pain, restrictiveness, and suspiciousness. Death-induced stress has been reported to cause prolonged grief disorder (PGD) and Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among other death-related factors (Falk et al., 2022). Losing a spouse to death causes loss of emotional bond and fractured companionship (Klaus, 2021; Schmitz, 2021); all-around psychosocial changes for the

surviving wife (Yoon, Park & Kim, 2022); without immunity to change in self-identity to widowhood and single-motherhood.

In the African context, women are economically disadvantaged in the labour market because of the lower wages they receive (Raniga, 2022). In most circumstances of being a single mother, financial instability, economic hardship, and poverty are common themes reported by single mothers. Poverty rate is reportedly high among single mothers (OECD, 2021); with single mothers (SM) facing multifarious versions of poverty-related stressors that could be explained in various contexts (Zagel, Hübgen & Nieuwenhuis, 2022). According to Febrianto (2021), single mothers' financial ordeals are excruciating due to reduced income, which was shared between husband and wife before being single. Single mothers (SM) are vulnerable to abject poverty-enhancing situations (Hübgen, 2020); are stressed by the financial strain of caring for their children alone (Heintz-Martin et al., 2020); and face financial problems that hinder full life satisfaction (Sabri et al., 2021). Sadly, stressors such as poor income, biased employment opportunities, non-sustaining wages, economic conditions, and poor mental health outcomes (Li, 2020) are poverty-induced stressors that suddenly transmogrify and reconstruct already established financial competence into a sudden financial lack.

Both young and old married couples have been consistently stressed by in-laws' interference, which has resulted in divorce and marital instability (Olofintoye & Faluyi, 2020). Involving a third party in a marital relationship may be beneficial to a certain extent. However, it poses challenges such as incessant conflicts, a lack of decision-making independence, and an over-reliance on external advice (Adebayo et al., 2024). A quantitative study by David and M'arimi (2017) assessed the parental influence on the marital instability of young couples aged between twenty and thirty-five years in Ruiru Sub County, Kiambu County, Kenya, and found that parental contributions to marital challenges and instability among young couples were significant in Kenya. It may appear that the Nigerian cultural norms unconsciously promote in-laws' interference by claiming that couples are part of the extended families, hence discouraging their marital autonomy.

Single motherhood (SM) may result from a personal decision to remain single. Jadva et al. (2009) reported that the number of women who choose to remain single has been increasing recently. Research on single motherhood reported that exclusive decision-making freedom, avoidance of marital tension, and maintenance of a calm marital atmosphere led women to remain single by choice (Dor, 2021). In addition, raising children among single mothers by choice had no adverse effects, as they were determined to provide their children with high-quality education (Golombok et al., 2016). Single mothers, whether by choice or for other reasons, were found to be motivated to face adversity because of their love for their children's future (Serrano et al., 2022): survival, education, and prosperity. However, single mothers by choice experience are not shut out from challenges as normal married women experience life resentments. These include, but are not limited to, poor social support, numerous responsibilities, emotional turmoil, and behavioural constraints (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023); financial and health challenges (Jain & Mahmoodi, 2021); poor education (Capkova & Jalovaara, 2020); and social vices, risky sexual behaviours, and infidelity.

Divorce and desertion are issues leading to single motherhood (SM) across the globe. Divorce occurs when both spouses' affinities cannot sustain the marital relationship. Divorce could occur through formal (i.e., court and family separation) or informal (i.e., crisis, fighting and assault, separation). Desertion or abandonment occurs when one spouse leaves the relationship without the other spouse's knowledge. Such may happen as a result of incompatibility, poor financial status, infidelity, physical assault, language barrier, different cultural background, autonomy in decision-making, sexual dysfunction, barrenness, and incompatible religious beliefs. This occurs when both couples are still alive but cannot get along well in the relationship. Unfortunately, the divorce rate is increasing at an alarming rate (Ushie et al., 2021), preventing blissful marital relationships with over-spilling effects on the individuals, communities, and society at large.

Infidelity in marital relationships leading to divorce in Nigeria is on the increase (Mayowa, 2020), with so many stressors bedeviling marriages. Infidelity in a marital relationship involves breaking rules, promises, and/or mutual agreement by one or both spouses (Grøntvedt et al., 2020); occurring in different forms such as physical, sexual, emotional, cyber, flirting, object, financial and and combined infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023); leading to treachery and divorce. Infidelity has been found to cause serious marital disagreement (Rokach & Chan, 2023); with men more disconcerted with sexual infidelity, while women are more distressed with emotional infidelity (Edlund et al., 2006 & Penk, 2008). Any gender/spouse that falls victim to marital infidelity automatically experiences mental health concerns, shame, a sense of guilt, depression, and low self-esteem (Okere & Ubani, 2020; Mubarok & Karim, 2022), with many women being affected than men in marriages.

The crave for having child or children in African marriage is basic and culturally sacrosanct. Childlessness in marriages dates back to the creation of man (Osagie et al., 2020), which appears to result in the major blame-game being shifted on women. Childlessness in the marital relationship, as explained by many researchers in different ways, depends on the context in which the study is conducted. For example, Adegbola and Akindele (2013) posited that childlessness is the inability to conceive a pregnancy within a year of getting married and the inability of a sexually active woman to give birth to a child (Obiyo, 2016). Within the space of 365 days, 84 percent of Nigerian women engaging in consistent unprotected sexual intercourse are expected to be pregnant (te Velde, 2000); failure to conceive within the limited period leads to frustration, divorce, disappointment, psychological stress (Afahakan, 2024); domestic violence, physical assault, abusive relationship, quarrel,, mental stress that may in turn lead to divorce/ separation.

Research Method

This qualitative research adopted an interpretive research paradigm, that is, devoid of statistical analysis of the gathered data, but rather focused on the social formation of reality. This does not necessitate predetermined independent and dependent variables; rather, it focuses on making sense of incidents as they occur, in a bid to understand a phenomenon in a particular social context (Gichuru, 2017). In addition to considering experiences of human behaviours (Rehman and Alaharti, 2016; Shah et al., 2013; Bhattacharjee, 2012), social surroundings and the discovery of concealed circumstances such as conflicts, challenges, and social-cultural outcomes (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

Sample and Sampling technique

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Fifteen (15) Nigerian single mothers (SM) aged 18-40 years were selected for this study using a judgemental sampling technique. Judgemental sampling technique is the conscious selection of respondents due to the possession of certain traits (Etikan et al., 2015); and full awareness of an occurrence of interest (Creswell & Plano, 2011); hence, providing in-depth information that aligns with the research objectives, with the willingness of sharing the information with the researcher (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Furthermore, the researcher purposively selected the participants due to their culturally diverse opinions on single motherhood. This aided a robust understanding of the stress and coping strategies employed by single mothers. Ethically, oral informed consent from each participant was obtained, with assurances of the absolute protection of their data. The sample was purposively selected through personal links, religious organisations, and non-governmental organisations between November 2024- February 2025.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen (15) single mothers in this study. Semi-structured interview method of data collection was considered suitable for this study because researchers would receipt comprehensive facts and data from the participants, while enhancing the researcher/s flexibility and adaptability in maintaining direction in the course of the research (Ruslin et al., 2022)

Data Analysis

The interview transcription was conducted with the assurance of absolute confidentiality, using pseudonyms to protect all information about the participants. Following Wakai et al. (2023), author T.A. listened to and familiarised himself with the recordings; created an appropriate template for the transcription process; ensured a true transcription and editing that aided readability and accuracy. Following a deductive analysis, thematic coding was done to ascertain codes relating to (1) single mothers' stress and (2) applicable coping strategies in mitigating against the stressors of single mothers. Following McKim (2023), meaningful member checking was used to ascertain the validity of the data collected for the study; this enhanced the credibility of the data (Elo et al., 2014); by presenting the findings of a study to some of the respondents that participated in the study to affirm the exactness of the analysis, interpretation, themes, allowed to make corrections and clear biases on the part of the researcher (McLeod, 2024). In ensuring the reliability of the data, peer debriefing was employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Demographic variables of participants (n=15)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Ethnic Group	Hausa (5)	33.333%
	Igbo (5)	33.333%
	Yoruba (5)	33.333%
Age of Single Mothers	18-22years (2)	13.3%
	23-27years (1)	6.7%
	32years(4) -28	26.7%
	33-37years (5)	33.3%

Variables	Frequency	Percent
	40 years (3) -38	20.0%

Table 1 shows the demographic variables of the fifteen (15) participants who were single mothers. All the participants were reportedly from the three (3) major ethnic groups in Nigeria that understood the English Language. Hausa 5 (33.333%), Igbo 5 (33.333%), and Yoruba 5 (33.333%). Also, table 1 shows that all the participants were young single mothers within the below age range: 18-22years (2); 23-27years (1); 28-32years (4); 33-37years (5), and 38-40years (3).

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the stressors among single mothers

Themes	Sub-Themes
Financial Constraints	Paying children's school fees alone Single-handedly paying the house rent Clothing burden The burden of feeding children alone Poor income/salary High cost of living due to inflation Paying the husband's debt
Stigmatisation	Childlessness Accusations (e.g, witch, infidelity, responsible for husband's death, responsible for divorce, bad luck, and poverty in the family) Forcing the separation of the children from their mothers Desertion
Disinheritance	Seizure of houses, lands, cars, jewelry, farmland, and children
Assaults	Beatings Obnoxious treatment in the case of death Long mourning period Emotional trauma Sexual Assault

Table 2 shows the main types of stressors affecting the well-being of single mothers in Nigeria. Four prominent stressors were revealed confronting widows in this study, they are: *financial constraints* (e.g., paying children;s school fees alone, single-handedly paying house rent, clothing burden, the burden of feeding children alone, poor income/salary, high cost of living due to inflation and paying husband's debt); *stigmatisation* (e.g., childlessness, accusations, forcing separation of the children from their mothers and desertion); *disinheritance* (e.g., seizure of houses, lands, cars, jewelries, farmland and children); and *assualts* (e.g., beatings, obnoxious treatment in the case of death, long mourning period, emotional trauma and sexual assault) respectively.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the coping strategies of single mothers

Themes	Sub-Themes
Exploring available formal and informal support networks	Seeking help from people Joining different support groups/NGOs Getting help from family members Getting help from neighbours Self-help Farming Petty trading Getting a new job Physical exercise Seeking palliatives Making friends

Themes	Sub-Themes
Faith-based religious support	Fasting Praying Joining the church workforce Availability for evangelism Church volunteerism Personal devotion
Remarriage	Contract/ temporary marital relationship Permanent marital relationship Sex-for-food and/or money
Therapeutic intervention	Seeking counselling Visiting Mental health/rehabilitation centers

Table 3 presents the main coping strategies used by single mothers in Nigeria to survive multifarious challenges. They are exploration of available formal and informal support networks (e.g., seeking help from people, joining different support groups/NGOs, getting help from family members, getting help from neighbours, self-help, farming, petty trading, getting a new job, physical exercise, seeking palliatives and making friends); faith-based religious support (e.g., fasting, praying, joining church workforce, availability for evangelism, church volunteerism and personal devotion); remarriage (Contract/ temporary marital relationship, permanent marital relationship and sex-for-food and/or money); and therapeutic intervention (e.g., Seeking counselling and visiting mental health/rehabilitation centers). Table 3 shows multiple pathways that single mothers combine to survive the adversities they face. Themes 1-4 show that widows do not necessarily adopt a single coping strategy but combine different ones that best suit them where they live, along with other factors that help them get through their problems.

Discussion of Findings

The population of single mothers in Nigeria is increasing at an alarming rate due to maternal and health challenges (Alaba et al., 2025), with 11% of young Nigerian women being single (Adewoyin et al., 2020). Considering this high population of young and energetic women who are single, this poses a major threat to the overall well-being of Nigeria. Given this, it is not surprising that young black women are prone to droves of adversities, especially those residing in high-risk communities in Africa (Nadat and Jacobs, 2021). Two research questions guided this study: What stressors confront single mothers in Nigeria? What are the strategies reported by single mothers in coping with adversities? In responding to these questions and the global prevalence of long-term single-parenting (Ebobo, 2024), single mothers' challenges and coping strategies were examined in relation to Nigerian cultural values and norms.

Determining the response to the first research question, the study showed financial constraint, stigmatisation, disinheritance, and assault as the stressors confronting single mothers in Nigeria. This aligns with the findings of Cruz et al. (2024), who found that financial constraints are hidden struggles faced by single parents. More so, single mothers experiencing lower income are automatically vulnerable to societal stigmatisation that stresses their mental wellness (Mohd et al., 2011). Following these challenges, the Nigerian culture gives inappropriate labels to single mothers by changing their identities from mothers to single mothers, exposing them to maltreatment, poor health, and low self-esteem (Mohd et al., 2011). Also, the findings of this study corroborate Dharani and Balamurugan (2024) that when a woman assumes the headship of a family, they experience financial constraints, different vulnerabilities, emotional trauma and the exposure of children to

risky sexual behaviours, suicidal ideation, dysfunctional parenting; all sorts of addictions; with the voices of low-income single mothers ignored and neglected in totality (Broussard et al., 2012). The plausible reason for these findings could also be traced to high inflation, rising unemployment, illiteracy, and cultural restrictions that bar many women from certain high-paying jobs.

Disinheritance and assault were also found to be stressors confronting single mothers in Nigeria. This is in tandem with the findings of Ehimadu (2022) that cultural practices, especially in Imo State, Nigeria, are so searing that widows or single mothers' relatives deprive them of the properties or inheritance of their husbands. Kogada et al. (2021) expressed concern that widows' and single mothers' right to property inheritance is grossly violated, leaving them and their children impoverished, economically poor, and begging. Flowing from the above, the study found that single mothers experienced assault (e.g., beating, obnoxious mourning rites, long mourning period, emotional trauma, and sexual assault) from family members and neighbours, compounding the challenges that faced them. Unfortunately, 96% of women heading different families due to separation or divorce reported violence (Bosch et al., 2019); high rate of sexual and emotional assaults (Marzieh, 2016); with these assaults likened to a cancerous situation damaging the human's general well-being (Makloph, 2021); without exemption to persistent mental issues and promotion of social vices in different societies. This could be traced to viewing women as mere objects, with no relevance in Nigerian cultural beliefs.

Despite the prevailing stressors confronting the well-being of single mothers in Nigeria, coping with the stressors is a must for the survival of the teeming population of single mothers. This study revealed that young widows reported four (4) major coping strategies that include: exploration of available formal and informal support networks (e.g., seeking help from people, joining different support groups/NGOs, getting help from family members, getting help from neighbours, self-help, farming, petty trading, getting a new job, physical exercise, seeking palliatives and making friends); faith-based religious support (e.g., fasting, praying, joining church workforce, availability for evangelism, church volunteerism and personal devotion); remarriage (Contract/ temporary marital relationship, permanent marital relationship and sex-for-food and/or money); and therapeutic intervention (e.g., Seeking counselling and visiting mental health/rehabilitation centers) in line with Affandy, Azizie & Ahmad, Norainie. (2024); single mothers relied on formal support such as assistance from the government, Non-Governmental Organisations, and other different structured and unstructured support networks to cope with countless challenges. Finding support in the face of challenges is appropriate (Holmgren, 2022); describing religion as a treasured asset in coping with stressors as single mothers (Sheets, 2014); and that it provides the needed emotional well-being for sustenance (Ukeachusim et al., 2023). Frequent religious service attendance was found to be a soothing coping mechanism that prevents loneliness and depression (Hawes & Tavares, 2024); preaching, prayers, and association with church members strengthen single mothers in coping with challenges, bracing them.

Furthermore, this study revealed that remarriage (e.g., contract/ temporary marital relationship, permanent marital relationship, and sex-for-food and/or money) is a coping mechanism used by single mothers to buffer their challenges. Marrying another man by a woman after the death or separation from a spouse boosts the physical and economic stability of single mothers (Smith et al., 1991). Sadly, sex-for-food and/or money has a risky sexual behaviour that

could expose single mothers to a series of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that affect them and aid the spread of curable and incurable diseases in a society/nation. Also, remarriage aids psychological adjustment to the loss of a loved one, promotes happiness in another romantic relationship, and helps overcome the stress of death or separation (Carr, 2004; Komarudin et al, 2022). As revealed in this study, therapeutic intervention (e.g., seeking counselling, visiting mental health/rehabilitation centers) was the least reported coping strategy used by single mothers. This is in dissent with the findings of Mbrugu (2020) that many women seek counselling services than men in the case of death and separation; with pastoral counselling/intervention as a major support system in coping with challenges (Folorunsho et al., 2023). Reporting therapeutic intervention as the least coping strategy used by single mothers could be traced to how weak counselling services are available for single mothers when confronted with stressors.

Conclusion

This study investigated the stressors confronting single mothers in Nigeria and how they cope with these challenges. It showed that Nigerian single mothers said single motherhood is an unexpected shift that no one ever hoped for. Single mothers (SM) are confronted with so many challenges, such as financial constraints, stigmatisation, disinheritance, and assaults. All these stressors affect the mental stability of single mothers in Nigeria. Going forward, single mothers employed different coping mechanisms (i.e., exploring formal and informal support networks, religious support, remarriage, and therapeutic interventions in surviving life challenges) to buffer their challenges.

Based on the findings of this study, the government, psychologists/therapists, and relevant stakeholders should raise greater awareness of the availability of counselling services that can assist single mothers in overcoming the challenges they face. More rehabilitation centers/clinics should be established in each Local Government Area in Nigeria. This will create more grassroots proximity and therapeutic interventions for single mothers confronted with negative outcomes. Cultural practices should be regulated by the law governing each country, so as to mitigate the vulnerability of single mothers to adversities and harmful treatments.

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