



The impact of single parenting on children and the role of Social work in supporting them

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the impacts of single parenting on children and the role of social work in supporting them. The study aims to understand life challenges among children in single parent families and their vulnerability to psycho-social issues affecting well-being of them. It can be helpful to social work professionals to understand the role of social work in supporting children in single parent families. The study setting was Semi urban area, located in Gampaha district which is reported high rates of single parent families. The study applied qualitative approach Using case studies produced more in-depth and comprehensive information for the study. Semi structured interviews; and observation were mainly used for the data collection. The data were categorized in to five themes and finding revealed that several factors contribute to the vulnerability of children in single parent household including inadequate income, multiple caring responsibilities, and lack of parental emotional support negatively impact the development process and the wellbeing of children. The study suggests some methods for best social work practice when working with single parent families and their children.

Key words: single parent family, social work support, wellbeing of children, vulnerability

1. Introduction

As a societal and global issue children at risk in single -parent families has received broad attention with numerous studies carried out on the problem over last decade (Popenoe, 1988, 1996; Whitehead, 1993; Blankenhorn, 1995; Krein , 1986). The United Nations has reported that there has been a shift from extended to nuclear families, as well as a raise in single parent households in the last fifty years

(Eastwood,2001).Even though ,it is the ideal for children to live with both parents, single parent families are fast becoming the new reality that society is faced with.

Parenting could be identified as a parent's responsibility to make sure that their children are safe, emotionally secure, physically healthy, educated, mentally stable, and care for their over-all well-being (Pugh and Erica, 1984). Single parenting is a phenomenon where a single parent takes care of a child or children without the physical assistance of the other parent. According to encyclopedia of children's Health, "Single parent families are families with under age of 18 headed by a parent who is widowed or divorced and not remarried, or by a parent who has never married"(Encyclopedia of children's Health, 2005).Single parenting can be either done by the male parent involved or the female one involved.Single parenting can be either done by the male parent involved or the female one involved.

The public image of the Sri Lankan family has been remarkably transformed in recent years. Family issues such as divorce, separation, illegitimacy, marital unhappiness, conflict between children and parents are seen as exceptions to the usual state of family life. Divorce, cohabitation and remarriages are experienced by growing number of people. According to Child and Women's Bureau statistics, in Sri Lanka, one in marriages now end in divorce and over 60 % of divorces involve children under sixteen (Child and Women's Bureau, 2007). One of the most obvious consequences is the increase in marital breakdowns and its effects on children. It has led to an increase in the family environments where the child does not get an opportunity to live without one of the natural parents. Recent statistics offer evidence of a crisis in the family. Out of 10 children in residential institutions 5 have single parents (Ministry of child development and child development and women empowerment, 2007). In Sri Lanka there were 209839 single parent families in 2001and in 2012 it was 501460 (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). Women are the head of 23% of households.80% female heads are over 40-year-old, 64-3% are widowed or separated,32% are listed as married (Department of Census and Statics, 2011). According to the Statistic in Sri Lanka, single parent families are taking a higher number.

These changes have created remarkable uncertainty in children's lives and have led to considerable assumption among policy makers and the public about the consequences of single parenthood.Some analysis argue that growing up with a single mother is primary cause of many of the country's most social problems, including povertyand economic insecurity, high school dropout, teen pregnancy, and delinquency(Popenoe, 1988, 1996; Whitehead, 1993; Blankenhorn, 1995).

Compared to children from intact families, children of single parent families are more likely to experience reduced psychological socio-emotional and cognitive well-being

and poor physical health, problematic behaviors, substance use and juvenile delinquency, lower educational and occupational attainments (Allison and Furstenberg 1989) increased risk of early home-leaving, early unplanned pregnancy, teenage marriage, and divorce. (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994.)

These factors are important in understanding the situation of the vulnerability of children in single parent families. It can negatively impact on the wellbeing of children and primary cause for number of problems in single -parent families. It should call for the highest attention of public service and the need of external support since these children are deprived of natural parental care. Therefore, this is timely needed study. The problem that is investigated in the study is what kind of social work intervention strategies can be used to minimize problems faced by children in single parent families.

03. Methodology

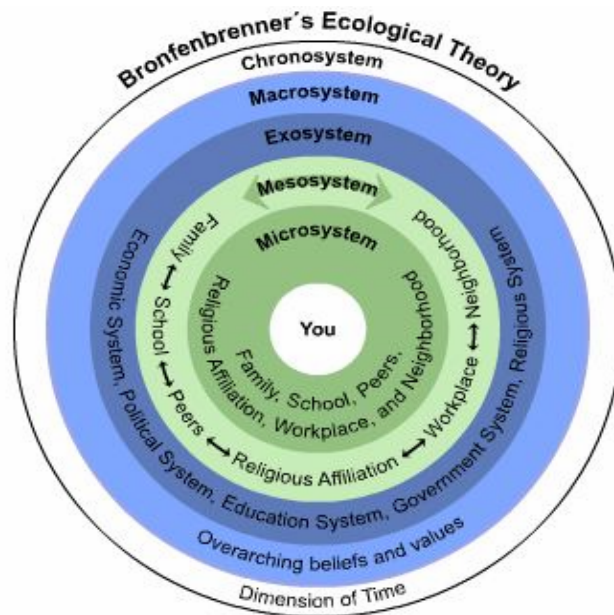
The aim of the research is to identify social work intervention strategies that can be used to work with children in single parent families in Sri Lanka. Since the qualitative research is all about exploring issues, understand phenomena and answering questions, this research applies the qualitative approach to study the setting. It emphasizes the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. Since the study aims to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior for the intervention, qualitative research approach employed for the study. Case studies (CS) were used as the main research method to get individuals' data for further discussion. Researcher used Semi-structured interviews (SI), Focus group discussions (FG) and observation (OB) to collect data for case studies. Further 05 interviews were carried out with single mothers to collect more data to enrich the understanding of the phenomena. The 06 case studies were used for the study.

3.. Theoretical perspective

The ecological theory emphasizes environmental factors as playing the major role to child's development. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) developed the ecological systems theory. In his theory of human development, he analyzed three types of systems that aid in human development, and also explain how everything in a child and the child's environment affects, how a child grows and develops.

Figure- 1

Ecological theory of human development by Bronfenbrenner



Santrock, John W. (2007).

The microsystem:

Micro system includes the family, peer group, neighborhood and school life. These systems help to shape a person’s development. A person has direct contact with them. Children’s microsystems will include any immediate relationships or organizations they interact with, such as their immediate family or caregivers and their school or daycare. The micro system is the small, immediate environment the child lives in.

The mesosystem:

The mesosystem consists of two Microsystems, the interaction of two microsystems environments, such as the connection between a child’s home and school. It describes how the different parts of a child's microsystem work together for the sake of the child. For example, if a child's caregivers take an active role in a child's school, such as going to parent-teacher meetings and watching their performances this will help ensure the child's overall growth. In compare, if the child's two positions of caretakers, mother with stepfather and father with stepmother, disagree how to best increase the child and give the child contradictory lessons when they see him, this will delay the child's growth.

The exosystem.

This system consists of the environment in which an individual is not directly involved, which is external to his or her experience, but on the other hand affects him or her. Such as parents' workplaces, the neighborhood. For example exosystem is the parent's workplace if the parent has a bad day at work, these events impact the family and the child. The exosystem level includes the other people and places that the child him/herself may not interact with regularly, but that still have a large affect on her.

The macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner's final level is the macrosystem, the larger cultural context, including issues of cultural values and expectations, which is the largest and most distant set of people and things to a child but which still has a great pressure over the child. The macrosystem includes things such as the relative freedoms acceptable by the national government, cultural values, the economy, wars, etc. These things can also affect a child either positively or negatively.

The chronosystem

The chronosystem includes actions occurring in the context of the past. These events may have impact on particular birth group.

Each of these systems is characterized by roles, norms (expected behavior) and relationships. For example, an individual usually acts in a different way within his or her own family than with in a class room.

The ecological theory of human development can be used to describe the quality as well as the context of the developmental environment that extends from childhood to adulthood and to later life. The theory emphasized the interaction between the individual and the environment and the complexity of this interaction in the developmental process. Many of the above stages can be relate to the different dimensions of an individual's development.

This model recognized that humans don't develop in isolation, but in relation to their family and home, school, community and society. Each of these multilevel environments as well as interactions among these environments is the key to individual development. Furthermore, how a child acts or reacts to these people in the microsystem will affect how they treat his /her in return.

The nature of single parenting and children

It is important to state that every single parent family is different. Children who are living with a widowed mother have a home life that is different from children with

divorce parents or those whose parents were never married. Single parents are generally classified according to the mode of birth of the child or children involved.

05. Main tips for raising children as a single parent.

- Single parenting due to death of spouse
A great number are widows who have lost their husbands due to the war. The loss of one member of the household, particularly the breadwinner has a marked impact on the family dynamics. Absence of members of the family due to death, injury or displacement created huge gaps in the functioning of the family unit.
- Single parenting due to divorce
Divorce is traumatic both for the parents and the children. Children are most affected as they are old between their parents. Children have to choose one parent over the other and this can be very traumatic as children are attached to both the parents.
- Single parenting through adoption
Adoption is an option for those who wish to bring child in their lives being single and for those who do not want to have biological children.

([http:// www.probationandchildcareservices.lk](http://www.probationandchildcareservices.lk))

The nature of childhood is universal. But childhood experiences and other characteristics of children vary and it has been shaped by their family life and other social practices regarding children. It can impact negatively on the wellbeing of children in single -parent families.

03 Findings and discussion

3.1 Economic background of single parent families.

It is apparent from the research findings that one parent household, who is typically headed by a divorced, separated, widowed, or never married mother, has significantly less financial resources than an intact family and less access to all the other advantages. When examining the monthly income and household consumption of the sample, they are living in poverty. And These poor conditions were mainly due to financial constraints as ten of the twelve indicated that there is not enough money to fulfill their basic needs. Ashen mentioned that having their grandmothers living with them was a great help as grandmothers supplemented their mothers' income and therefore, they are able to manage financially found that poverty (and economic status) had stronger effects on cognitive and educational outcomes than on emotional and social adjustment" (McLanahan, 2000. 42). Less money often led to more disruptions and created more problems in their education. Lack of school materials,

meals and engaging in extra work for day to day earnings has seriously affected these children's school lives. Respondents who experienced economic difficulties during their early school years had lower rate of school completion than children and adolescence that experienced poverty during last two years. The economic situation of the family was measured in this analysis in a number of ways. According to the data cohabiting relationship also improved mother headed family's economic situations. Evidences from interviews indicated that men in cohabiting relationship contributed economically towards the house hold. "If our Mama did not live with us it can be hard for us with money."

The analysis suggests that economic recovery for women and children cohabitation had considerable economic benefit for these families. According to the available data there were two respondents living with another adults. These people facilitated single mothers to go for jobs by providing a voluntarily available source of child care, by allowing for the sharing of resources, particularly housing cost. Single parent families that live with others had some economic relief. According to the data analysis we can conclude income loss exercised as a powerful negative force on children's well-being.

3.2 Housing

Housing cost, least flexible component of a household budget, is also an important factor in financial security of a single parent house hold. According to the data majority of children of the sample did not have access to suitable, adequate, and affordable housing. However, 13% of respondents of single parent households live in houses that are too small for the number of members in the household was in need of major repair. The following two explanations reflect the different housing arrangements.

"Mama built a room for us in the backyard". (Anuradha) "We live in a windy house behind my aunty's house"

Given their income it is too costly for these families to find accommodation out of their community. With their current income some even find it difficult to find a suitable accommodation in their own community. Therefore, these single parent households were more likely to experience housing problems.

3.3 Health

Health has an impact on so many aspects of an individual's life. It's hard to discuss the well-being without taking health in to consideration. Good health allows individuals to strengthen their development and it is central to a lively learning environment for children and youth. Therefore, Physical and mental health is

important for families and individuals throughout the course of their lives. Through the analysis of data and the visibility of health condition of respondent children it can be concluded that the poor health conditions of these children have lead them to poor academic achievement. Lower earning of the parent or care giver has mostly affected their physical and mental health.

“Every time we go to bed with no food” (Chathuri)

As one of the school teachers said during an informal discussion, “lacking of nutritional food had led to malnutrition which had blocked their development and delayed their readiness for learning when they enter school.”

3. 4 Leisure /Free time

Leisure or free time can be used to earn important personal and social benefits. An involvement in leisure activities typically provide enjoyment and relaxation, reduce stress, and improve mental health and physical fitness. Research also suggests that leisure activities that are physically and mentally stimulating are important to healthy growth and development of children from single parent families.

When examining the ways, the research participants use their leisure time it focuses on two indicators. Leisure time focuses on the available hours per day and how they balance this time with day today work and caring for themselves. The findings reveal that nearly 60% of the children in the sample spend more than four hours per day for their leisure activities. One of the facts revealed leisure activities is that these children spent a greater amount of time on passive leisure activities such as watching television. Due to the economic insecurity and instability within father absence families, boy children had to earn money for their living. Therefore, they had to work two three hours after school time, which leads to missing their leisure time. According to the findings, four of these children spend one-hour or more per day for leisure activities. However, in these single parenting houses, children do not get proper guidance on how to spend leisure or free time on hobbies or activities such as reading which can stimulate their thinking.

3.5 The environment

The environment influences a person’s health state and overall well-being. In turn children’s activities such as learning, recreation, leisure activities, and social relations subsequently affect the quality of the environment. The growth of population and

increased level of urbanization, industrialization created stress on the natural environment of this community. Even though this community is located in Gampaha municipal area, children of this community do not have proper place for their recreation, and have no access to libraries and to cultural, religious, or social organizations. The research findings also show that the children from single parent families are marginalized from natural resources than children from intact families.

3.6. Social participation

Social interaction and childhood improvement of the children was measured with identifying the children's participation in extracurricular activities (Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan &, Lerner ,2017). Evidence from interviews indicated that such children were withdrawn from social activities. 2 girls and 4 boys from the sample reported having no close friends and no idea regarding social activities such as children's societies, youth clubs, and scouts, cultural orreligious organizations. Two children reported having some close friends. Among the respondents the two boys who are 17 and 16 years old belong to a gang in the area.

3.7 Social and cultural influences on parenting practices

When examining the quality of parenting evidences from focus group interviews with mothers indicated that being a single parenting was a very tuff and challenging task and they often worries about the effects of single parenting, thing had to be done alone without having any body to share responsibilities with. Apart from this, in a male dominated world, they were generally paid less, irrespective of their knowledge. Lack of intelligence and lack of abilities have also become barriers for their daily living. One of the positive effects of single parenting is that when they are raised by one parent their bond and relationship with that parent is generally much stronger than it would have been otherwise.

“My mother tries to do everything for me she also buys me whatever I want. She said that she is not going to make me suffer because of my father”.

When the cultural aspects of single parenting are taken in to account the issues are complex. Changes in family networks and situations affected these parenting practices. According to the existing data extended family pattern of the society contained another adult or grandmother or grandfather within the single house hold. Having other adult in the home, particularly, a grandmother or other relative could provide a child with extra emotional support and supervision. There were six single parent families living with grandparents. In addition to having other adults available to help with children could also benefit the single mothers coping abilities.

The skills that parent had in dealing with children had a deep influence on children's well-being. The evidence indicated that some parents reported weaken parenting practices immediately following divorce which contribute to some of the problems that children experience.

Another fact that had caused lower well-being among children is the conflict between parents prior to, during and after the divorce that contribute to. There was also evidence that children began to have difficulties, post divorced conflict had a strong influence on children's adjustments. The study shows that children in single parent households were under a lot more stress.

4. The role of social worker

The finding shows that there is a great need for positive social and behavioral intervention for children and their families. The role of social work is to provide family centered services to help children to reach their full potentials. Families can identify stressors with the help of social worker and find different types of support and coping strategies to ensure physical and mental wellbeing of the children and their families. A social worker is a person to talk to someone who will listen therefore parents can talk about their feeling, challenges and life experiences. Single parent family can identify different kind of stressors and life challengers with the support of a social worker and identify coping strategies to reduce day today problems. The other important thing is social worker can link community resources such as medical assistance, housing. Social workers are the key professionals who can provide long term support to vulnerable children and their families such as to develop interventions to support the positive social and emotional growth and the development of parenting intervention.

05. Conclusion

This study aims to develop understanding of the impact of single parenting on children and the role of social work to support them. It focuses on examine the gaps in multiple needs of children in single parents' families in Sri Lanka. The result suggests that these children have deprivations in nutrition, clothing, education, leisure and social life. Social workers have the professional knowledge and skills to identify the interventions (Stevens, 2014) that enhance success, wellbeing of these children and social workers use in their practice with children at risk. Applying the findings to practice the author recommended a number of ways to the development of children from single parent families. It can be mention five themes summarizing the interventions in social work. Through developing relationships such as making home

visits to support the parents in providing positive parent –child interactions, providing families with information, skills and supports related to enhancing the skill development of the child.

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