

## Being One in a World of Twos: Experiences and Consequences of Single Parenting

**Maitri Jain, B.A.**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

**Venus Mahmoodi, Ph.D.**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

*Even though the number of single-parent households has been increasing in recent decades, they still face many challenges, including finances, health, and social stigma. This is a global literature review that aims to understand the experiences and difficulties faced by single-parent families and how cultural and social factors shape these challenges. This review shows that single parents have more negative experiences than coupled parents in most cultures worldwide. Certain difficulties like economic challenges are found globally, while others such as relational difficulties are found more in collectivistic cultures (Mudau et al., 2018). There are also differences in the types of challenges experienced by single mothers versus single fathers, with mothers facing more economic challenges and fathers facing more caregiving difficulties (D’Mello et al., 2016). In more feministic cultures, like Swedish, there is a smaller discrepancy between genders as the state creates equal support and opportunities for both single mothers and fathers (Barber, 2003). Furthermore, single parenthood can significantly impact children’s health during and after birth, academic performance, and psychosocial development (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Sinha & Ram, 2018; Wang, 2015). This review asserts that most problems faced by single parents are not due to inherent limitations, but rather discrimination and stigma rooted in their respective communities. The paper also discusses the need for further cross-cultural studies on single parents’ experiences and their impact on children while also considering important factors in developing interventions for single-parent families to help manage psychological distress and provide economic support.*

*Keywords:* single mothers, single fathers, children, social stigma, culture

What does the word family mean? The answer to this question has changed over the course of human civilization. Traditionally, a family consisted of a heterosexual couple with their biological children. More recently, a family is defined in terms of love and bonding among individuals who live together, who may or may not be married, who may or may not be related by blood (Powell, 2014). This new understanding has generated greater acceptance for non-traditional family types such as gay and lesbian couples and single-parent families (Powell, 2014).

Although the definition of the word family has been expanded within the literature, most people still consider a two-parent heterosexual family as the societal ideal. Single parents are at a greater disadvantage not only because they have to face social stigma (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015) like other non-traditional family types, but they also bear the burden of fulfilling the dual role of both a mother and a father, having no partner with whom to share responsibilities (Bhat & Patil, 2019). Despite these significant social and household challenges, the number of single-parent families is increasing globally (Woessmann, 2015). Worldwide, between 2000 and 2012, the percentage of fifteen-year-olds living with a single parent increased from 12% to 14% (Woessmann, 2015). In the United States, 27% of children lived in single-parent families in 2018 compared to only

12% in 1970 (Smock & Shwartz, 2020). In 2011, 5% to 10% of households globally were considered single-parent households (The Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2016), with wide variations around the world. For example, in New Zealand, 11% of all households were single-parent, while the percentage in Japan was less than 3% (OECD, 2016). Although worldwide rates are low, some parts of the world have higher rates of single-parent households. For example, in South Africa, 14% of children lived in single-parent households in 2014. Many reasons have been proposed for this high number, such as high divorce rates, premarital fertility, increasing educational level of women, mobility due to employment, gendered migration, poverty, high death rate of mothers, and decrease in number of marriageable men (Ntoimo & Mutanda, 2020).

The most recent review on single parenthood was conducted by Anderson in 2003. It studied the influence of various external factors, such as poverty, on the experiences of diverse single-parent families, such as those from a minority background. Given that this literature was reviewed nearly twenty years ago, the present review aims to provide a more recent analysis of the experiences of single-parent households. The objective of this paper is to understand the demographic and socio-emotional challenges faced by single-parent households. The effect of social factors, specifically gender and culture, on single-parent families' experiences are also explored. This review will help clarify the experiences of single-parent households and the factors that impact their overall functioning. In turn, this will inform the development of appropriate interventions to support such families (Figure 1).

## **Methods**

### ***Eligibility Criteria***

This review encompasses studies on single-parent households. A single-parent household is defined as a family in which a mother or father cares for one or more children without the physical assistance of the other parent in the home, irrespective of the reasons for such a situation (Ganesha & Venkatesan, 2012). This includes single parents due to divorce, a partner's death, artificial insemination, adoption, surrogacy, or pregnancy in a short-term relationship. Only studies conducted between 2000 and 2020 were incorporated to prevent the inclusion of outdated and irrelevant literature. The exclusion criteria included studies that were more than 20 years old and those discussing experiences of non-binary parents. While the single parenthood experiences of diverse gender identities are important to highlight, the present review focuses on experiences of households with either a cis-female (single-mothers) or a cis-male (single-fathers) parent. Although we acknowledge that non-binary parents also experience distress due to single parenthood, their gender identity creates additional stigma, which is outside the scope of this paper.

### ***Search Terms***

We conducted a search on PubMed and Google Scholar, using the following search terms: "single parents", "single mother", "single father", "children with single parent", "challenges of single parent", "challenges of single mother", "challenges of single father", "experience of single parents", "experience of single mothers", "experience of single fathers", "qualitative single parent", "cultural stigma against single parent", and "culture and single parents". Of the 150 studies found, 70 abstracts were screened at the title and abstract level. In this initial reading, 16 studies were removed because they did not fit the inclusion criteria. The remaining 54 studies were included in the full article screening, and all were included in this review.

## **Results**

### ***Included Study Characteristics***

Of the 54 studies included, 11 were conducted in the United States, 12 were conducted in Africa, (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana). Nine of the studies were conducted in Europe (Great Britain, Sweden, Italy, Finland, New Zealand, Croatia), five in India, three in China, four in Japan, and one each in Iran, Korea, and Taiwan. Three of the studies included samples from across different continents. Four of the studies focused on multiple countries within the same continent—one was conducted in Europe and the other three in Africa. Four of the studies found were narrative reviews.

Many of the studies (17 out of 54) focused on children's well-being in single-parent households. Eighteen of the studies explored the experiences of both single mothers and fathers. Eleven studies focused solely on single mothers, while only six looked exclusively at single fathers' experiences. Further details about the studies can be found in Table 1.

### ***Sociodemographic Factors Associated with Single-Parent Households***

**Focus on Parents.** Although single-parent households share many characteristics demographically, they differ on the gender of the parent and the cultural milieu. Barber (2003) compared 85 countries around the world and found that single parenthood rates declined as fathers became more involved in their children's upbringing, but the rates increased as urbanization levels, male unemployment, and female literacy increased. The authors hypothesized that more economically powerful women are less likely to marry because they do not need a husband for economic support (Barber, 2003). Furthermore, the age of single motherhood was higher in countries with a greater gross national product (GNP) (Barber, 2003), which is "an estimate of total value of all the final products and services turned out in a given period by the means of production owned by a country's residents" (Barnier, 2021, para. 1).

In the US, Lansford (2016) showed that single mothers experienced more economic adversity than single fathers, likely due to the higher probability of dropping out of school, holding low-paying jobs, and losing income. In the UK, single parents were shown to have lower income, education, health prospects, and career opportunities than coupled parents (Calder, 2018). The same study showed that due to their gender disadvantage, single mothers faced less optimal work-life balance, less flexibility at work, and fewer opportunities to care for their children than single fathers (Calder, 2018). In Britain, two-fifths of mothers spent some time as single parents in their lifetime but tended to have a relatively short duration of single parenthood of 4.6 years or less (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000). By building blended families, these mothers' standard of living improved substantially (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000). Interestingly, these family constellations did not improve the mother-child relationship, especially if these relationships were deteriorated by previous family conflict (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000). However, even these stepfamilies were not very stable and dissolved after some time (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000).

Mugove (2017) stated that single mothers in Zimbabwe were less educated and, when married, depended on their partners for income and intellectual stimulation of their children; however, upon separation, they faced significant economic disadvantages. Lu et al. (2020) similarly showed that single mothers in the US had less income than single fathers; and therefore, they faced higher levels of economic crisis and increased dependence on governmental financial and social support. Meier et al. (2017) found that unemployed single mothers in the USA were less happy and more stressed than employed single mothers, showing that employment is important for both financial and

psychological well-being. Amoateng et al. (2004) showed that in South-Africa, single-parent households were more likely to be poor (67%) as compared to nuclear-families of which only 34% fell into this category.

Although there are significant income gaps between single mothers and fathers, there has been a reduction in the income gap between 1990 and 2010 in the USA, shifting from 30% to 21% within 20 years (Kramer et al., 2016). However, concerning financial status, both genders were found to fare worse than coupled parents (Kramer et al., 2016). In contrast to the US, in Taiwan, incomes of single-father families have decreased, whereas those of single mothers increased between 1998 and 2006 (Cheng & Wu, 2016). This is likely because of increasing gender-empowerment in Taiwan, where women have more equality and rights as compared to many other industrialized nations (Yi & Chang, 2020).

**Focus on Children.** According to the Structural Family Theory, a healthy family structure consists of both parents and their children (Mikeal, 2018), and any deviation from this family constellation might cause unhealthy developmental patterns. Based on this premise, children growing up in a single-parent household will experience significant negative developmental, social, and psychological consequences. Studies have shown that children born to single mothers experienced more negative neonatal outcomes, including low birth weight, preterm birth, small for gestational age, and admission to the neonatal intensive care unit (Raatikainen et al., 2005). Mothers to these children were more likely to be unmarried and less likely to engage in prenatal care than other women (Raatikainen et al., 2005). Furthermore, these mothers were also more likely to be primiparous, use alcohol, smoke, and have pregnancy-related diabetes (Raatikainen et al., 2005).

There are mixed findings of how single-parenting impacts children's physical health and development. While some studies showed that these differences found were only due to the covarying differences in socioeconomic status (Blakely et al., 2003, in New Zealand; Moncrief et al., 2014, in the USA; Noonan & Turchi, 2019, in the USA; Tian & Wang, 2019, in China), others reported that single parenting had a negative impact on factors such as child mortality, homicide, and childhood stunting (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Ntoimo & Odimegwu, 2014). However, it is important to note that adequate controls for other socio-demographic factors were not included in the latter set of studies. It is possible that these confounders caused significant results. More extensive and controlled studies should be conducted to understand the impact of single parenting on children's physical health.

There is more congruity among findings regarding the academic performance of children living in single-parent homes. For instance, various studies conducted in Africa (Akinremi et al., 2020; Azuka-Obieke, 2013; Chukwuka, 2018) found a reduction in academic performance, motivation, and creativity among those growing up in single-parent households. In Asian countries, including Japan (Raymo, 2015) and India (Rani, 2006), these children were more likely to drop out, have poorer grades, and get a job outside of school. Watt (2019) said that this reduction in performance is due to the lower socioeconomic status of single-parent families and the parent's lack of participation in school activities. These results are more promising as they highlight where to intervene to improve access to opportunities for achievement.

### ***Socioemotional Challenges Faced by Single-Parent Households***

#### **Focus on Parents.**

**Psychological Strain.** In addition to economic difficulties, single mothers face psychological distress. They are also perceived as less successful parents by others in the society. Dejean (2012) found that adult, white, married and unmarried, female

participants in the USA rated vignettes of single mothers as more insecure, unfortunate, irresponsible, immoral, disreputable, and less satisfied with life when compared to the ratings of single fathers.

Similar results were found in other areas around the world. In Japan, single mothers were more stressed, both at home and work, and spent less time with their children (Raymo et al., 2014; Shirahase & Raymo, 2014). In Ethiopia, single mothers experienced many financial problems and psychological challenges such as loneliness, helplessness, and hopelessness (Rahel, 2014). Single mothers also struggled to provide financial and educational support to their children, limiting their educational achievement due to minimal support from the community and government (Rahel, 2014). Mothers in South Africa also reported working harder to build good relationships with their teenage children and inculcating social skills in them (Mudau et al., 2018). Khosravan et al. (2010) analyzed Iranian widowed mothers' experiences who chose to keep custody of their children after their spouses' death. Results showed that these women faced many conflicting and distressing emotions, experiencing despair and a desire to improve their children's lives. Many cited their only reason for living was for the sake of their child. They had a sentimental, emotional parenting style, sacrificing their own needs and wants while developing a child-oriented attitude to keep their children's lives as good as possible. This kind of *intensive mothering* (Molander, 2019), where the mother gives all her time, energy, and money to her children, is found worldwide among women of various cultures (Molander, 2019). Similarly, in the US, many single Black mothers felt they were not doing enough for their children, even after giving up things for their protection, such as intimate relationships, financial resources, and their freedom (Elliott et al., 2015).

**Social Stigma.** Stigma against single parents is found throughout the world. In China, being a single mother is considered a disgrace, and non-marital childbearing is illegal (Zhao & Lim, 2020). Single unmarried mothers who have a child are not allowed to receive social welfare (Zhao & Lim, 2020). These women are often forced to adopt various strategies such as using sex, community support groups, online influence, and fake marriages, to fight against the prevalent patriarchal ideals in which they have no social status and lack even the most basic rights (Zhao & Lim, 2020). In India, single mothers reported a lower social status (D'Cruz and Bharat, 2001). Because they lacked male companions, they found it difficult to engage in many daily tasks such as making purchases and running their homes smoothly (D'Cruz and Bharat, 2001). They also faced social disapproval from their in-laws and relatives, experienced unwanted sexual advances, and tended to experience many physical and mental health problems (D'Cruz and Bharat, 2001). Moreover, widows were expected to dress soberly and were condemned if thought to act too "happy" (D'Cruz and Bharat, 2001). Similar results were also gathered in Africa, where there is much stigma against single mothers, especially teenage single mothers (Mulongo, 2006). Typically, mothers were deemed irresponsible and deviant; whereas, fathers were not held responsible for a relationship's dissolution and any associated consequences (Mulongo, 2006).

**Positives of Living in Collectivistic Cultures.** Even though stigma against single parents is present in all cultures, some benefits come with living in a collectivistic society. Single mothers in Korea faced stigma for having a family that deviated from the normative two-parent nuclear family (Park, 2014). However, since Korea has a collectivistic culture, single mothers' strong family ties helped moderate the negative consequences of single parenting on children (Park, 2014). This was also found in India, where single mothers could leave their children with other family and community members, which provided free, quality childcare (Rani, 2006).

**Feministic Cultures.** The picture for single parents looks slightly different in feministic cultures that believe in a more equal society. In Sweden, being a single mother is correlated to the parent's lack of commitment to developing a permanent relationship (Barber, 2003). This phenomenon reduces the time fathers typically spend with their children (Barber, 2003). Moreover, Sweden is a welfare state, and because single mothers and children receive high levels of economic support from the government, there is more childbearing before marriage (Barber, 2003). This has also made it easier for single women to manage their families without facing conflicts with their workplace or without economic cooperation from former partners (Barber, 2003). Despite such good policies, single parents still reported worse health outcomes than coupled parents in Sweden, especially single mothers, who were less likely to go to physicians (Westin & Westerling, 2006). The reasons for this are currently unknown and should be studied further.

**Single Fathers.** Although single mothers face more difficulties in the areas discussed above as compared to single fathers, men are still vulnerable to difficulties and challenges related to single parenthood. One such challenge is that single fathers face many stereotypes, including being poor caregivers or not wanting children. D'Mello et al. (2016) showed that Indian single mothers, although stigmatized more than single fathers, tended to have a more extensive support system to help with childcare. However, unlike the prevailing social myth, research shows that men have a strong desire to have children (Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Coles (2003) found that Black men voluntarily took full custody of their child following non-marital birth, divorce, adoption, or widowhood because they wanted to become a positive influence in their children's lives.

Unfortunately, single fathers are also at risk of succumbing to these stereotypes. Carone et al. (2017) found that even though fathers wished to bring up their child, they worried about the quality of caregiving they could provide, both in terms of social and material resources. Single fathers in New York City, an urban setting, mentioned that living near family helped them work, run errands, and answer parenting questions, whereas single fathers living in suburban areas were able to provide more security and recreational resources for their children (Carone et al., 2017). Yet, no matter where they lived, they still experienced challenges that negatively influenced their parenting experiences, including difficulty finding adequate childcare, the absence of the mother, limited finances, finding adequate housing, acquiring adequate medical insurance, and communication (Melhado, 2017). Single fathers from Hong Kong and Taiwan who immigrated to Canada also faced many challenges, worsened by the lack of social support in the new country (Waters, 2010). These men went from being businessmen to homemakers. This phenomenon impacted their identity and self-worth. Their authority at home was contested, and they felt as if their identity as a man was being challenged. However, they still cared for their children's well-being, and their relationship with their long-distance wives remained the same after separation (Waters, 2010). Studies found that there was more support for single fathers in feministic cultures, such as Sweden, to take on caregiving roles by providing them with resources to spend time with their children without the social stigma (Molander, 2019). Unlike the prevailing global ideology of intensive mothering, Sweden has a state policy that seeks a more gender-equal situation promoting a more sensitive, caring, present, and home-oriented masculinity ideal (Molander, 2019). This allows fathers to engage in caregiving behavior that is traditionally considered "feminine," such as cooking and cleaning, and still avoid tensions related to these activities being so-called low status (Molander, 2019).

**Cross-Cultural Comparisons.** There were very few studies that compared the experiences of single parents across different cultures and countries. Heinonen (2019) conducted a study on a cross-national sample from the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ecuador to study the experiences of divorced mothers. The findings revealed that despite facing increased demands of childrearing and financial challenges, a divorced life also gave mothers more flexibility and opportunities to build a better life. The stress of excessive demands was offset by the joy they received from playing with their children. It was better than being in an inharmonious marriage where they are constantly stressed because of conflicts with their spouse (Heinonen, 2019). However, Heinonen (2019) did not compare the experiences of divorced mothers in different countries. Thus, while the study presents a positive angle of the lives of divorced mothers, it does not give us any information on how culture and socialization impact these experiences. Stavrova & Fetchenhauer (2015) compared experiences of single parents across different countries in Europe. They found that the number of challenges faced by single parents varied based on the country being studied. In countries with a more collectivistic culture and a stronger two-parent norm, single parents experienced less life satisfaction and happiness. The social stigma and expectations in such countries influenced self-stigma in single parents, often leading them to feel like they are not good enough parents to their children (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). The experience of non-married parents has also been shown to depend on the gender norms of countries. Where these norms are more traditional, mothers are expected to put in time at home, while fathers are expected to invest in their careers (Stavrova et al., 2012). If these expectations are not met, stigma, social-disapproval, and discrimination follow (Stavrova et al., 2012).

**Focus on Children.** Much research has looked at the psychosocial outcomes of children of single parents across different countries and cultures. Wang (2015) found that fourth to eighth-graders in China who lived with only one parent had less psychological capital such as resilience, self-esteem, and social competence available to them compared to children living in dual-parent households. They were also less developed psychologically in terms of their social and emotional competence. Students who had better relationships with their teachers and peers had greater self-esteem, social and emotional competence, and resilience in both types of families. Those children who were on good terms with their neighbors were more prosocial than children who did not interact with their neighbors, especially in single-parent families. The findings highlight how the school environment can help improve issues that arise as a result of growing up in a single-parent household.

Lower psychological and emotional development of children growing up in single-parent households has been found in multiple countries. In African countries, Azuka-Obieke (2013) and Mikeal (2018) showed that children growing up in single-parent families scored lower on assessments of psychological well-being, such as happiness and self-esteem, than children from dual-parent households. These children faced psychological disorders such as depression (Ntumi et al., 2016), suicide, and substance abuse at higher rates (Weitof et al., 2003). In India, children from single-parent households, especially those headed by a single father, had a higher intensity of externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors (Ganesha & Ventakesan, 2012). Specifically, girls from single-father households had the greatest problem behaviors, followed by boys from single-father households. In contrast, girls in single-mother households were most well-behaved. Sinha and Ram (2018) also found that children growing up in single-parent households in India tended to hide more from their parents, had higher rates of dropping out of high school, and had higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse. Nonoyama-Tarumi (2017) said that female-headed households in Japan face problems because of a lack of economic

resources, while father-headed households face challenges due to limited parenting resources. Erdelja et al. (2013) suggest that higher rates of delinquency among children from single-parent households in Croatia are likely due to attention-seeking and yearning for affection.

These studies highlight the various challenges both adults and children in single-parent households experience, ranging from social stigma to psychological distress. It also brings attention to how these challenges are experienced differently in cultures with differing norms. One finding of concern is the intergenerational transmission of distress that occurs in single-parent families. The negative impact on children's education and psychosocial well-being may have a long-lasting effect and even have consequences for the generation to come, creating a vicious cycle.

## **Discussion**

### ***Culture and Gender in Single Parenting***

This relevant review highlights many important points about single parents' experiences throughout the world. We find that single parents from all cultures experience many challenges, including economic difficulties and psychosocial distress. However, when considering different countries around the world, single parents experience and engage with these challenges based on their value systems. For instance, there are both advantages and disadvantages to living in a collectivistic culture for single parents. On the one hand, collectivistic cultures can be more prejudiced towards single parents and create more social and relational challenges. On the other hand, as found by Rani (2006), these cultures also provide opportunities for help with caregiving and parenting, which can reduce the burden on a single parent.

Cultural factors interacting with the gender of a parent significantly influence parenting experience. Single mothers were found to fare worse in terms of financial capabilities, whereas single fathers struggled more with caregiving and parenting skills (D'Mello et al., 2016). This can be explained by the Structural Functionalism Theory of Gender (Wienclaw, 2011), which says that society has divided different roles between genders to promote efficient functioning. From birth, boys and girls are socialized differently to take on these specific roles (Wienclaw, 2011), including heterosexual coupling. However, this gender divide can break down when families do not follow these traditional ideals. When a single parent is raising a child, this parent takes on the role of multiple genders, which can be problematic in a traditional society where the parent has not been socialized to take on these additional roles. For instance, if a mother takes on the role of a full-time worker while caring for her children, she might be judged or scorned for taking on the "earner" role and not focusing exclusively on caretaking. Overall, single mothers tend to be ostracized because they are not seen as competent to run their households independently and are expected only to provide caregiving (Zhao & Lim, 2020).

Another cultural factor that impacts single parenting is a culture's level of adherence to feministic ideals. In countries like Sweden, where gender norms are not as stringent, males and females are equally able to engage in caregiving tasks without facing stigma and shame from society (Molander, 2019). However, this is not the case for many other cultures. For instance, in the US, Black men are often questioned for deciding to take sole custody of their child (D'Mello et al., 2016). This may be because the US is a predominantly Judeo-Christian country where most people follow less feministic and more traditional roles (D'Mello et al., 2016). In India, single fathers tend to have less extensive social support as compared to single mothers for childcare assistance (D'Mello et al., 2016).

### ***Intergenerational Transmission of Harm***

This review showed that the negative social norms against single parents might create consequences that last for multiple generations (Raatikainen et al., 2005). These challenges not only affect single parents but also their children's physical, academic, and psychosocial wellbeing (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Sinha & Ram, 2018; Wang, 2015). Girls in single-father households tend to struggle the most since fathers have limited knowledge of raising their daughters (Sinha & Ram, 2018). Finally, there are intergenerational implications when single parents face economic and social difficulties, putting their children at increased risk of similar sociodemographic and psychological issues due to poor resources, time, and parental care provided to the child (Raatikainen et al., 2005). The study by Wang (2015) highlights how teachers, peers, and neighbors can be a source to offset these risks and create a healthier environment for children growing up in single-parent families.

### ***Implications for Interventions***

These findings highlight the need for interventions for single-parent families to improve their sociodemographic and psychosocial wellbeing. Due to the prevailing social biases and traditional gender roles, where fathers are earners and mothers are responsible for emotional support, single parents' support programs focus only on fulfilling these gendered roles. These programs focus on single fathers' job situations, while for single mothers, the focus is on the lack of a social network (Kullberg, 2005). However, rather than focusing on traditional gender roles, there is a need for more holistic interventions that tackle the wide-ranging problems that single parents face, particularly related to childcare.

The efficacy of one such intervention was highlighted by Taylor & Conger (2017). They showed that improving social support and internal strengths of single mothers, such as positive coping strategies, optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, improved mothers' and children's well-being. Newkirk et al. (2020) found that positive workplace policies, such as schedule flexibility, also reduce depressive symptoms in single mothers. In the case of women who faced conflicts in managing both the demands of work and home, with work impinging on their home life, a more extended time off work postpartum can reduce depressive symptoms. Briggs et al. (2013) highlighted the utility of a group training program in reducing parent-child dyad conflicts in single-parent families. This type of behavioral training program aimed at increasing parenting skills, such as dealing with child non-compliance and assessing triggers for undesirable behavior. However, examples of such interventions are limited and are bound to Western cultures. Building more of such interventions to support single-parent families and testing their efficacy with families from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds will be beneficial in improving the lives and conditions of single-parent families.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

A limitation of this review is the inclusion of studies focusing solely on the experiences of cis-gendered single parents. Other genders were not included in this review as it was beyond the scope of this paper. Further studies are needed to understand the experiences of non-binary parents to see how they navigate the world of single parenthood and determine both the challenges and strengths in the parenting role as related to their identities.

Further, there need to be more studies that compare experiences across different cultures. Currently, there are very few studies that compare single-parent experiences in different

cultures, and the ones that do are limited to specific regions. Such comparative studies will help clarify protective and challenging factors for single parents.

Another area in which studies seemed to be lacking is the internal, subjective experiences of single fathers. While demographic and psychological correlates of single fathers have been assessed, very few studies have looked at the emotional experiences and perceptions of the challenges of bringing up a child on their own. To provide specialized support to single fathers, developing an understanding of these topics can contribute to the development of interventions for this particular population.

### **Conclusion**

The present review aimed to understand how cultural and gender factors impact the experiences of single parents, and how they influence children's health. Across different cultures, single parents have negative experiences, which can be due to economic difficulties and social stigma. This was found to be more applicable to single mothers than fathers. It also impacted children's development in areas of academics, health, and psychosocial well-being. Finally, this study calls for more global studies on single parenthood experiences while also considering essential factors in developing interventions for single-parent families to help manage psychological distress and provide economic support.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maitri Jain, K-14 F, New Delhi, India, 110017. Telephone Number: +91-9811421490. Email: [mj3002@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:mj3002@tc.columbia.edu)

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of Studies Included in the Review*

Author (year)	Method	Countries	Population of interest	Sample size
Stavrova and Fetchenhaeur (2015)	Survey	27 European countries	Male and female single parents	85,051
Ntoimo and Mutanda (2020)	Survey	31 African countries	Never married single mothers	36,122
Heinonen (2019)	Survey	UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ecuador	Single parents with multiple children	520
Lansford (2016)	Narrative review	-	Single parents and their children	-
Calder (2018)	Narrative review	Europe	Single parent families	-
Mudau et al. (2018)	Qualitative interviews	South Africa	Single parents with teenage children	Single mothers = 5 Single fathers = 5
Rani (2006)	Structured interviews	India	Single mothers living in slums	214
Lu et al. (2020)	Survey	USA	Working, single parent head of households	N=1135 Single mothers = 86.5% Single fathers = 13.5%
Meier et al. (2017)	Survey	USA	Single and partnered mothers with children under 18 in the household	N=7,074 Partnered = 76.86% Single = 23.14%
Kramer et al. (2016)	Survey	USA	Working single parent householders	554,633

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				Single mother = 83.7 % Single father = 16.3 %
Cheng and Wu (2016)	Survey	Taiwan	Single mothers and fathers	Single fathers = 641 Single mothers = 730
Khosravan et al. (2010)	Subjective interviews	Iran	Single parent widows	24
Molander (2019)	Subjective interviews and photo diaries	Sweden	Single fathers with full or shared custody	16
Elliott et al. (2015)	Subjective interviews	USA	Low income, black single mothers	16
Mugove (2017)	Questionnaires, observation checklist, document analysis	Zimbabwe	Single mothers, single fathers, children growing up in single parent households	School teachers = 30 School heads = 18 Parents = 20 Children = 20
DeJean (2012)	Survey	USA	Never married custodial single mothers and fathers	N=1,350 Single fathers = 670 Single mothers = 692
Zhao and Lim (2020)	Semi-structured interviews	China	Unwed single mothers	30
D'Cruz and Bharat (2001)	Narrative review	India	Different family types	-
D'Mello et al. (2016)	Narrative review	India	Single parent families	-
Coles (2003)	Quantitative and qualitative surveys	USA	African American single custodial fathers	10
Carone et al. (2017)	Survey	Italy	Single father families created by surrogacy	33
Raatikainen et al. (2005)	Interviews, clinical records, surveys	Finland	Unmarried pregnant women	Unmarried women = 8235 Married women = 17,138
Blakely et al. (2003)	Survey	New Zealand	Children in single parent families	742,587

Moncrief et al. (2014)	Clinical records	USA	Children of single parents hospitalized for asthma or bronchodilator-responsive wheezing	526
Noonan and Turchi (2019)	Survey	USA	Children living in single parent families	Children in single-father families = 239 families, Children in single mother families = 2,989 Children in two-parent families = 10,178
Tian and Wang (2019)	Survey	China	Children living in single parent households.	N= 1114: 974 Dual-parent children = 974 Single mother children = 97 Single father children = 43
Amato and Patterson (2017)	Longitudinal Survey Data	USA	Children in single parent households with health risks	Children who faced accidents = 1910 Children who faced homicide = 1802 Children who faced suicide = 1796 Children with neoplasms = 1828
Ntoimo and Omidégwu (2014)	Survey	Sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Nigeria & Democratic Republic of Congo)	Single women and their under-5 children	Cameroon = 11,748 Nigeria = 28,100 DRC = 8,999
Akinremi et al. (2020)	Survey	Nigeria	Children of single parents	50 students in 5 different

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				secondary schools
Azuka-Obieke (2013)	Survey and testing	Nigeria	Adolescent children of single parents	100
Chukwuka (2018)	Survey	Nigeria	Children in primary school of single parents	N = 240 Teachers = 80 Students = 160
Raymo (2015)	Longitudinal Survey	Japan	Children in single mother families as compared to those living with both parents	Unmarried mothers = 1,937 Married mothers = 3,838
Watt (2019)	Survey	USA	Single parents and their children	Parents = 7 Elementary teachers = 3
Wang (2015)	Survey	China	Children from both single and two parent families	Single parent children = 431 Two-parent children = 544
Mikeal (2018)	Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, surveys	Ethiopia	Children growing up in single-mother, single-father, and intact households	Single mother headed families = 33 Single father headed families = 10 Dual-parent families = 63 Children raised by some other relative = 9
Ntumi et al. (2016)	Survey	Ghana	Children living under single parents	47
Weitoft et al. (2003)	Survey	Sweden	Children living with single parents	65,085 Children with single parents = 65,085 Children with two parents = 921,257
Ganesh and Venkatesan (2012)	Survey	India	Children growing up in single and dual parent households	Single parent households = 150

				Dual parent households =150
Sinha and Ram (2018)	Survey	India	Unmarried youth having both or only one parent alive	N = 28,637 Married men = 8,052 Married women =13,912 Unmarried men = 11,522 Unmarried women = 17,362
Erdelja et al. (2013)	Survey	Croatia	Delinquent children	Delinquent, incarcerated male adolescents = 100 Matched school children = 100
Nonoyama-Tarumi (2017)	Survey	Japan	Children in single-mother, single father, and two parent families	14,383 students in 391 schools
Melhado (2017)	Semi-structured interviews	USA	Single fathers	14
Amoateng et al. (2004)	Survey policy report	South-Africa	Family structures	-
Stavrova et al. (2012)	Survey	30 countries around the world	Co-habilitating families	21,821
Ermisch and Francesconi (2000)	Survey	Great Britain	Single mothers	9,459
Barber (2003)	Survey	85 countries around the world	Single parents	-
Park (2014)	Longitudinal survey	Korea	Single parents and their children	3,357 families

Raymo et al. (2014)	Survey	Japan	Single mothers	Dual-parent families = 2000 Single-parent families = 2000
Shirahase and Raymo (2014)	Survey	Japan	Single mothers	60,070,09
Waters (2010)	Interview	China and Canada	Immigrated and left behind single fathers	4
Westin and Westerling (2006)	Survey	Sweden	Single parents	Single parents = 150 Couple parents = 891
Mulongo (2006)	Interviews, Focus group discussions	Kenya	Teenage single mothers	9
Rahel (2014)	Interviews	Ethiopia	Single mothers and their children	Single mothers = 11 Children of single mothers = 11
Hadley and Hanley (2011)	Interviews	England	Biologically childless men	10

**Figure 1**  
*Objectives and Structure of the Study*

