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EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN CHILD CARE IN NEPAL: A NARRATIVE
INQUIRY

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on exploring the firsthand experiences of single mothers in Phalinandan Rural Municipality, located in the Nawalparashi district. The study examines the challenges faced by four selected single mothers who have lost their husbands for various reasons but are actively involved in raising their children and ensuring their enrolment in school with the support of the *Aama Samvad* program initiated by Stromme Foundation, Nepal. Key areas of exploration include the difficulties associated with childcare responsibilities, economic conditions, children's schooling, decision-making, and how adolescents influence parental and social functions/behaviors.

This research used a qualitative method to explore the experiences of single mothers who have joined *Aama Samvad* and sent their daughters to the Youth Samvad program. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to collect data on their experiences caring for their children. The narrative inquiry method allowed the participants to share their stories in their own words.

This study highlights a gendered division of roles, with males as primary earners and females managing household affairs. Single mothers, predominantly in agriculture, face limited vocational training opportunities. Despite challenges, they prioritize their children's education. *Aama Samvad*'s assistance, coupled with government allowances, proves crucial for these single mothers in their dual roles. The study emphasizes the recognition of education and vocational training for economic empowerment.

Keywords: *Education, Single Mother, Income, Agriculture work, Aama Samvad, Youth Samvad.*

Introduction

When the mother has to play the role of both father and mother, in such situations, the mothers are known as single mothers. However the magnitude of the challenges in the lives of single mothers is rather disruptively high, and some mothers seek professional mental help as well. She assumes the roles and responsibilities typically associated with parenting and providing for her family independently. This could be due to various circumstances, such as divorce, separation, widowhood, or choosing to have a child without a partner through methods such as adoption or assisted reproductive technology. According to Birara (2021), "*There are different types of parenthood i.e. intact family, divorced family, single mother, and widow*". Single mothers often face unique challenges as they navigate parenthood and strive to meet the needs of their children while managing their own personal and financial circumstances. SAMBAD program initiated by the Stromme Foundation played a crucial role in empowering single mothers and adolescent children of Phalinanda ruler municipality, Nawalparasi District, Nepal.

The Stromme Foundation is dedicated to fostering a belief in 'shaping one's destiny' and strongly emphasizes empowering youth, particularly girls. Committed to combating poverty, the foundation operates in Nepal in alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4. With a global vision and mission to liberate individuals from poverty, it strives to provide opportunities for minority communities to transform their livelihoods.

The foundation's objective is to instigate positive change by addressing material needs, creating avenues for individuals to leverage their talents for development, and engaging with people in a spirit of openness and respect. This involves a focus on promoting gender equality, addressing environmental concerns, fostering inclusion, and actively opposing corruption. To achieve these objectives Stromme Foundation has initiated the SAMBAD program for the

marginalized groups in ruler areas. SAMBAD encourages practitioners to engage in regular practice to gain awareness of their surroundings, develop tolerance for life events, and share their feelings, problems, dissatisfactions, hindrances, anxiety, and pain within the SAMBAD forum. Through SAMBAD after completing their courses youth graduate which is highly supportive of self-empowerment as well as career development. *Aama Sambad* is also a popular program the Stromme Foundation runs to empower women in society. From this program, many women from marginalized groups have benefited by developing skills of self-awareness of personal hygiene, communication, decision-making, and many more.

“A single mother is a woman who has a dependent child or children and who is widowed, divorced, or unmarried. (APA, 2019). In general, a single mother has to face many more challenges in their life while taking care of the child. They need moral and financial support to care for their child. The field of family research has historically focused almost exclusively on the impact of mothers on children’s development and functioning, while the importance of children’s relationships with fathers, other family members, and nonfamilial adults has received inconsistent and inadequate attention (Coley, 1998).

Significant of study.

The study explores stories of single mothers caring for children during adolescence who have joined the Aama SAMVAD program initiated by the Stromme Foundation in Palhinandan Rular Municipality, Nawalparasi district, Nepal. To achieve success through education and social participation, parental support is essential. Parents play an important role in the development of children. As a result of their intentional participation in learning activities, they have the power and ability to mold and develop their children into persons who are inspired, driven, and forgiving (Naite, 2021). I’ve noticed various factors contributing to concerns about living alone as a single mother with a child, such as early marriage, unequal partnerships, pursuing foreign employment, and the loss of a spouse. “ *Single mothers have less perceived social support, lower levels of social involvement, and less contact with friends than married mothers*” Cheeseman (et al., 2011).

Research Questions

We generated the following two questions to gear up this study.

- a. How do single mothers narrate their experiences in their child care?
- b. How can adolescents influence Parental and social functions/behaviors?

Theoretical Referent

We used attachment theory as our theoretical referent. Attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1969), suggests that early attachment experiences between an infant and their caregiver play a critical role in shaping the individual’s social and emotional development across the lifespan. The theory of attachment, initially put forth by Bowlby, delineates the emotional bond that forms between caregivers and infants. During the infantile phase, children need to imitate a powerful connection with their caregiver, often their mother. Grounded in their attachment experiences, children construct an internal working model (IWM) encompassing their self-conception and their inclination to depend on others for necessary attention and nurturance (Wang, 2021). This process of constructing an IWM, contributes to children’s future cognitive development and equips them with the capacity to devise coping strategies for challenging circumstances and beyond.

Methodology

This research embraced a qualitative approach within an interpretative paradigm, employing narrative inquiry as the chosen method. The utilization of narrative inquiry aimed to extract rich, grounded information from the participants' evocative experiences. This study investigates the experiences of single mothers caring for their adult children in Palhinandan rural municipality, Nawalparasi district. Four single mothers participating in the Samvad program, initiated by the Stomme Foundation, were selected. In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions, with oral consent obtained for recording. The interview process, conducted formally and informally, involved building trust, observing facial expressions, and analyzing voice tones. Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to develop themes. Findings were interpreted, respecting informants' perspectives, and the meaning-making process included reviewing participant narratives, articles, and theories. Credibility was ensured through detailed attention, aligning with Vaismoradi et al.'s (2016) recommendations. Ethical guidelines of Kathmandu University School of Education were followed.

Participant's Demographic Profile

Our first Participant(P1), Chandrawoti Gupta, aged 35, lives in a small hut with her two children. Her first child is a 14-year-old son, whereas her second is a 12-year-old daughter, both enrolled in a government school. It has been seven years since she became a widow, following her husband's death caused by excessive alcohol consumption. Before his passing, he used to work in India and provide for the family. Unfortunately, he suffered from jaundice and liver problems, and despite undergoing treatment, he succumbed after six months. The loss of her husband made it challenging for Mrs. Gupta to sustain herself and care for her children. She took up a cleaning job at a school for two years to make ends meet. With the support of the SAMVAD and the local government, she eventually managed to establish her small shop. She is a member of Aama SAMVAD as well her daughter is also a member of Sambav.

Our second participant (P2) Sita Devi Thakuri 39 years living in a joint family along with her three children and two sons, the first son is 19 years old and studied up to 11 left school due to financial problems and the second son is 16 years old and studying in grade 10 and daughter is 17 years and studying grade 11. She lost her husband due to cancer. Entire family members were worried about her husband's treatment and took him to in hospitals Bhairahawa and Gorkhpur for medical treatment. Cancer was in the last stage, treatment became useless. He could not survive more and died. He used to run a utensil shop in the village. He was only the source of income in the family. After his death, she started to work on the other's agricultural farm to earn money. Her family has their land where crops are cultivated for family purposes. She joined the *Aama Sambav* after the death of her husband became supportive of overcoming her husband's tragic demise and empowered herself through various programs. Even she has joined her daughter in Sambav.

Our third participant (P3) is Uma Devi Gupta of Bishnu Pura. She is 40 years old. She has been living as a single mother, caring for her children for eight years. She lost her husband due to excessive consumption of alcohol. Her son is 22 years old and her daughter is 16 years old. Her son got married and lived separately with his wife. The daughter is studying in a government school. She got married to an alcoholic man. Due to her husband's alcoholic habit and physical harassment, she could not stay long in her house and returned to her father's house and stayed for

10 years. When her husband got ill, she came to take care of him after three months he died. After the death of her husband, she started living in her own house. She is currently earning by working as a tailor. She is empowered with the support of *Aama Samvad*. She has enrolled her daughter in SAMVAD.

Our fourth participant (P4) Kanchan Devi Gupta is a single mother taking care of two sons and one daughter. Her husband passed away last year. Her husband was killed by an unknown person and a dead body was found on the bank of the river. He was only the source of income. When I reached her house, I observed the pathetic economic condition of the house. The next day of the interview was the death anniversary of her husband. But there was no preparation for the rituals. The reason behind this was poor financial condition. In the house, she is staying with her mother-in-law nearly 80 years old, daughter 14 years old, and son 20 years. She joined *Aama Samvad* after the death of her husband and enrolled her daughter in the SAMVAD program.

Economic Condition

In the context of Palinandanrural Rular Municipality, male family members are the major sources of income. To find out the income source of the family after the death of a male member of the house (husband). I asked every single mother how you are fulfilling day the day-to-day needs of her family members after the death of her husband. According to Participant P1 *“For two years I worked in the private school as the cleaner after that with the financial help provided by the foundation and widow allowance received from the government.* She added proudly that after bonding with *Aama Samvad* she got the opportunity to learn about how to earn and save money. In addition, she shared that *“I started Chat Pat and Kirana shop.”* This economic activity made her financially strong to fulfill the needs of the children. In a happy mood, she showed the cooperative's daily passbook where she saved her regular income.

Participant (P2) shared that her family has the 3 biga land separated among three brothers. On the land, seasonal crops are grown for family purposes only. So, for earning money, she works as a laborer on other farms. By listening to her I can say that kitchen stuff is earned from the farm but for money she has to work in other farms. While talking about saving. She shared that after joining the *Aama Samvad* she has realized the importance of saving money which became very helpful to her in need. Moving to the Participant (P3), I discovered that she has opened a tailor shop near her house. Tailoring has become a source of income for her, allowing her to meet her children's basic needs, especially her 16-year-old daughter. In addition to stitching clothes, she also works as a laborer on other people's farms to earn money. She shared that *“Tailoring became possible due to Aama SAMvad”*. She even said, *“I learned how to reduce expenses and save money.* It became said to fulfill the financial needs of her children.

Participant (P4) was confused as she does not have any skills for earning money other than working in the fields and at home. Whenever the landlord calls her to work in cultivation time, she earns money. It is the seasonal source of earnings. When sharing about the economic condition, it is currently pathetic. It is difficult to fulfill the regular foodstuffs. She is covering daily expenses from the allowance received from the government i.e. widow allowance. She was worried about the rumor that the government would not continue the allowance. She shared all in her emotional voice. She added, *“By joining Aama Samvad I got the opportunity to learn the skill of saving money by reducing the expenses.”* It became very helpful in supporting the family's financial needs. She added *“I have brought remarkable change in my life”*.

According to Kent (2022), “*Many single mothers have very low levels of financial reserves*”. It seems that women need to be economically independent. However, the husband is earning for the family. Life is unpredictable. Women also need to be involved in earning activities for themselves and their families as well even though their contributions might be less. It will make them independent. Different effective empowerment business-oriented training needs to be launched in the rural areas of Nepal.

At the same time, family should have a saving habit of at least a nominal amount from their earning which would be a great support in the tough time. Saving, a sacrifice of current consumption, provides for the accumulation of capital which, in turn, produces additional output that can potentially be used for consumption in the future (Gersovitz, 1988). Earnings will be always insufficient until and unless we manage them properly. Each parent needs to teach a child how to save money. Develop the saving culture. Very few members have a habit of saving money.

Similarly, an expense plan must be made according to earnings, which helps control the misuse of money by the family. At the same time, the family should have a saving habit of at least a nominal amount from their earning which would be a great support in the tough time. When a woman becomes financially strong, it helps her to support in fulfillment of her children’s basic needs.

Decision Making

Decision-making is the family's most important part as decisions' consequences should be tolerated by all the members. Informants shared that decision-making rights solely go to a male head member of the family. After the death of their husbands, responsibility was transferred to them. As all the participants had not had the opportunity to get a formal education, they were unable to make any kind of decision in the family. The *Aama Samvad* program became very helpful to all the participants in learning the soft skills of decision making at the same time they got the opportunity to learn communication skills. “*Decision-making is the process whereby an individual, group, or organization reaches conclusions about what future actions to pursue given a set of objectives and limits on available resources*” (Russo, 2014). Learning and experiences make a big impact on decision-making. After talking with all the participants I can reflect that single mothers became capable of making financial decisions for their families, daughters sending school for education stopping child marriage, and going against the dowry system for the family and society.

Children’s Schooling

Children's schooling is part of the responsibility of the parents. While talking about the study of their children. According to Participant (P1) “*I have enrolled both the children in a government school. Their study is satisfactory and they are doing school work themselves*”. “*The first son is 19 years old and studied up to 11 left the school due to financial problems and the second son is 16 years old and studying in grade 10 and the daughter is 17 years and studying grade 11*” (P2, interview). She was thankful to the government as both children were studying in high school. Because of the free education policy financial burden of education is reduced. Participant (P3) her both children studied in a private school up to grade 8 with self-financing as the economic condition was sound. However, after the death of her husband, due to financial problems, they had to switch to a government school.

Participant (P4) her child has been admitted to a government school and her study is average. She added, “*School does not charge tuition fee but need manage exam fee and stationaries which is difficult for me*”.

“*Education is the key to success in the future and to have many opportunities in our life. Education has many advantages for people*” (Al-Shuaibi, 2014). It illuminates an individual’s mind and thinking. Single mothers are aware of the importance of school education. So, all the single mothers have enrolled their children in school. This all became possible through the *Aama*

Samvad program. During empowering sessions in *Aama Samvad* mothers were encouraged to send their children to school. As a result instead of child marriage mothers' have sent their children to school.

Adolescents influence Parental and Social functions/behaviors

All the participants have sent their children to the Youth Samvad program with the motive of empowering them with different knowledge and skills to learn after the death of their husbands as part of child care and social growth. Specially, to take them out from the tragic trauma of their father's death. Children were enrolled in the Samvad program. Each child of the Samvad gets an opportunity to learn adolescent health care, awareness programs against child marriage, soft skills (interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and decision-making), and vocational training.

When I asked, "Are there any changes in your child after enrolling in Samvad?" P1 shared, "*My daughter became very much conscious of her health as well as family member's health*". She added, "*She has learned communication skills and supports me in my shop.*" She proudly said, "*My daughter is actively participating in the social functions and became very polite while talking to me and her brother*". While talking to other remaining participants, they also shared similar points of view that their children are learning different things in SAMVAD and being helpful to them. Their children are alert about child marriage and work in society to run awareness programs against child marriage and the dowry system. Despite facing numerous challenges, single mothers recognize the significance of the SAMVAD program and have chosen to enroll their children in it. After completing the courses in SAMVAD, children have shown remarkable change in their personal growth as well as in society. SAMVAD has played the most important role in helping single mothers uplift their daughters through knowledge and various vocational training. Children's assistance with household tasks and active participation in social work make it easier for single mothers to care for their children.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Upon conducting a comprehensive interview, I realized that the male members of the family serve as the primary source of income. At the same time, the females are responsible for managing household affairs and childcare. Furthermore, women are significantly involved in agricultural activities. According to Evason (2017), "*Females are often perceived as the caregivers of society and are commonly dependent on their husband and/or father's provisional income. In homes where both the husband and wife work, the assets are usually still in the man's name. Thus, among undereducated and impoverished social demographics, women can find themselves quickly destitute if separated by circumstances outside of their control (i.e. widowed or divorced)*". In Nepal patriarchal system has been practiced since ancient times in which men primarily held positions of dominance and privilege. However, women's education and empowerment are going on for independence in the family for income. Some changes can be observed in society, like women being given opportunities in the various sectors for employment and political participation. *Aama Samvad* has encouraged women to be involved in earning activities, which is supportive of transforming women's way of living.

Regrettably, the male members tend to consume excessive amounts of alcohol and subject their wives to physical harassment. The main reason for mortality within the family is alcohol consumption. According to the Global Status Report On Alcohol and Health (2018), "*Nepal had the 3rd lowest alcohol consumption in South Asia 7.4 liters per capita among drinkers in 2016, but it was the cause of 2.3% of deaths. Globally, in 2016, over 3 million people, mainly men, died due to harmful use of alcohol & it caused over 5% of the global disease burden*". In Nawalparasi, 75% of single mothers lost their husbands to alcohol abuse. These women shoulder all family responsibilities from a young age. "*Single mothers experienced more stressful life events, together with increased mental health issues, as compared to married women*" Cheeseman (et al., 2011). In developing countries due to various factors of the society single mothers used to suffer. Lack of awareness and economic alternatives contribute to men's

alcohol consumption. Urgent programs are needed to raise awareness and prevent early widowhood, leaving children without the opportunities they would have had with their fathers.

Women of the Palhinanda Rural Municipality, Nawalparasi district many women in their late 30s and early 40s are illiterate, and very few members have vocational skills like tailoring and knitting but they prioritize their children's education. According to Birara(2021),” *single mothers worked hard and tried their best, but their children could have difficulties based on different reasons. Thus, single mothers deserve greater attention and need intervention and treatment efforts to improve their economic and social outcomes*”. They depend on their husband for financial support in the family. *Aama Samvad* has encouraged each member to develop a culture of saving. So that in future there won't be a financial crisis.

According to the attachment theory, early attachment experiences between an infant and their caregiver play a critical role in shaping the individual's social and emotional development across the lifespan. The theory of attachment, initially put forth by Bowlby, delineates the emotional bond that forms between caregivers and infants. In the case of the single mother, she has to play both the parent's role for the child's socio-emotional development. Based on the care given by the caregiver, children have been shaped accordingly in society. As a part of caring besides fulfilling children's basic needs, single mothers have sent their children to school to educate them and enrolled them in *Youth Samvad* for overall development. Attachment theory also emphasizes the relationship between caregivers and adolescent children. Caring differs from one age group to another. Single mothers are caring for their children by empowering them socially and emotionally with the support of SAMVAD where adolescent children are provided an opportunity to learn about girls' personal hygiene and self-awareness programs.

This research offers valuable insights for society in supporting single women coping with the unexpected loss of their husbands, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing their vocational training for financial independence. Recommendations include giving preference to single mothers in vocational programs, guiding local governments, aiding educators and school principals in understanding the needs of children from such families, and influencing national educational policies. Additionally, providing free tuition, stationeries, exam fees, and uniforms can reduce school dropouts among children from single-mother households. In the days ahead, it will be crucial for the Stromme Foundation to enhance the effectiveness of the *Aama Samvad* and *Youth Samvad* programs.

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