

# **Profile of Single Mothers in Southern Malaysia And Issues Afflicting Their Lives**

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## **Abstract**

Becoming a single mother is a traumatic experience due to the stress incurred in shouldering innumerable responsibilities encompassing providing financial means, managing the household and raising the children. These issues afflicting single mothers may inadvertently result in negative implications. This is because some of the troubled single mothers might take an easy way out by committing suicide or becoming prostitutes in attempting to overcome the challenges and crisis faced. Hence, this study aimed to identify issues and challenges faced by single mothers, and compile a profile of single mothers. The study was conducted in Johor, a Southern State in Malaysia, involving 100 randomly selected single-mother respondents. Data were collected via questionnaires comprising question items on the background of the respondents and the challenges they face, measured from the aspect of the economy, family, social stigma and emotional psychology. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0) software was used in analysing the data, where descriptive analysis, namely, frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research objectives. The results showed that single mothers aged 41 years and above dominated the study, comprising 87% of the respondents, compared to 2% from the 21-30 age group, and 11% from the 31-40 age group. The main problem afflicting single mothers was economic problem (M = 28.85). This was followed by emotional and psychological problems (M = 27.09), social stigma (M = 25.17) and family issues (M = 23.92)

**Keyword:** Profile, Issues, Challenges, Afflicting, Life, Single Mothers

## **Introduction**

Divorcees and single mothers are not uncommon in today's society. According to statistics released by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the divorce rate in 1997 stood at 11,777 and significantly increased by 20,529 cases in 2007, with the highest divorce registered in the state of Selangor totaling 3,722 cases (Mingguan Wanita, May 2008). The increase in divorce rate over the years has resulted in Malaysia experiencing an increase in the number of single mothers, and this is a worrisome scenario. Based on the 2000 census report, there were 620,389 single mothers in the country, comprising various ethnic backgrounds. Of this total, 529,701 were widows, while 90,688 were divorcees. Selangor boasts the highest number of single mothers, with a total of 16,748, followed by Perak (15,969) and Johor (14,790) (Thuaiabah et.al, 2004).

The single mother polemic is not new in our society. With new responsibilities that have to be borne alone, families headed by single mothers face three major problems, namely, inadequate income, parenting difficulties particularly in monitoring the children and housing issues (Devaraj; 2011). Challenges faced by single mothers as head of the family are arduous because they have to shoulder dual responsibilities, where they are not only the breadwinner, but they are also the managers and educators of their children. Among the major challenges faced by single mothers are financial problems, emotional stress, psychological and physical problems, challenges in providing their children with education, care and love, and also negative social stigma towards them. Diyana et al (2009) concurs with this view as she too believes single mothers face enormous challenges as head of the family as they need to juggle competing priorities in providing financial means, and managing their children's education.

Becoming a single mother is a traumatic experience due to the stress incurred in shouldering innumerable responsibilities encompassing providing financial means, managing the household and raising the children (Rani, 2006). In addition, society's innumerable perceptions of single mothers also have a negative impact on the lives of single mothers. Wan Halim Othman (1995), points out that among the prejudice faced by single mothers is the perception that single-mother families are dysfunctional families as there are no fathers disciplining the children. This result in the children becoming wild and ill-behaved, making them susceptible to negative behaviours such as gambling, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, stealing and prostitution. Ultimately this would lead to fragmented and broken families. Children from single-mother families have low self-esteem as they do not have a father, unlike normal children who have fathers who support and guide them. Low self-esteem causes the children to isolate themselves, not have friends and lack confidence in their studies. In addition, single-mother families do not have security features which could have an indirect negative impact on the children, leading to failure, disappointment and violent actions resulting from economic problems and abject poverty, causing the children to drop out of school and scour for work in an attempt to assist their respective families.

According to a study by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the loss of financial resources is a major cause of concern among single mothers aged in their 40s (Montenegro, 2004). This concern is due to several factors, among which include the deferment of their education or career development as they are the sole custodian of their children, the loss of their source of income from their ex-husbands despite getting custody of the children, the lack of support from their children, or inequitable salary payment due to discrimination (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Compared to families with both parents, single mother families not only have fewer financial resources, but also only half of the adult time resources. In Malaysia, most single mothers face desperate financial situations. For instance, Utusan Online (October 23, 2011) revealed that a single mother, Hatijah Musa, in Yan, Kedah had to support 6 children and an unemployed son-in-law, despite her ailing condition. Despite a monthly income of just RM600, she did not receive any monetary assistance, including from the Community Development Department

(JKM). According to Wan Halim (1995), single-mother families live in poverty as there is no economic assistance from the fathers. Thus, children from single-mother families tend not to be well fed, well dressed and does receive any school pocket money. It is in fact the norm for children from single-mother families to quit school and look for employment in an attempt to assist their families.

Apart from financial problems, stress is also one of the challenges faced by many single mothers. According to Hittner (1998), working single mothers are burdened by excessive responsibilities in meeting life demands. They rush to work, send and pick up the children to and from daycare, do endless household chores well into midnight. This portrays the typical life of single-mother families worldwide.

Single mothers also need to bear the responsibility of educating and nurturing their children. According to Zahazan (2006), due to the special bond with their children, mothers play an important role in both the children's development and growth, and early education. However, the finding of a study conducted by Nor Ainun (1997) indicated that the ability of single mothers to provide education for their children is low, particularly those who were single due to being divorced by their husbands. This is because such single mothers suffer from disillusionment and depression. This is consistent with studies in the US which show that children in single-mother families lag behind in social and education aspects in comparison to children with both parents (Papalia et al, 2009).

Most single mothers also experience emotional stress as they need a life partner to share love and affection (Nor Ainun; 1997). In addition, social stigma also adds to the emotional stress of divorced single mother as the stigma exacerbates the feelings of frustration and loneliness. Cairney, Boyle, Lipman and Racine (2004) concur with this view as they suggest that single mothers require two or three times more frequent counseling and professional assistance compared to the norm, for the purpose of mental health. The emotional distress experienced by single mothers has in fact been acknowledged by the government, whereby the Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Senator Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun has indicated that the government will pay due attention to the physical and mental health issues and legal problems afflicting single mothers (Berita Harian Online, 2009 May 18).

The severity of problems experienced by single mothers, if left unaddressed, can lead to a negative impact on the nation's development of human capital. As mothers play a significant role in nurturing and educating their children at an early age (Zahazan, 2006), it is obvious that the hand that rocks the cradle can rule the world. Thus, this study which identifies the scenario and challenges faced by single mothers in southern Malaysia in leading productive lives, is indeed timely and significant.

## **Literature Review**

Nor Ainun Ibrahim (1997) in her study entitled 'Ibu Tunggal, Kajian dari Segi Pendidikan Anak-anak: Satu Kajian Khusus di Wilayah Persekutuan.' (Single mothers, A Study in Relation to Children's Education: A Specific Study In the Federal Territory), conducted a survey on the ability of single mothers to bear the responsibility in educating, nurturing, caring, financing and raising their children without the active involvement of a husband. In addition, the study aimed to find out how single mothers overcome emotional stress due to their inner self and their children. Findings of the study showed that the relationship between single mothers and their children is at a moderate level. This is because the single mothers did not devote sufficient time with their children. In fact, the study found that 30% of the single mothers surveyed perceived the presence of children in their lives since the absence of their respective husbands to be burdensome. Nevertheless, there were others who feel that the presence of their children to be a source of strength to continue living. The study also found that the ability of single mothers to

provide education for their children is at a low level, namely 20%. Many children of single-mother families tend to be less successful in life due to the pressures they experienced. However, there were also single mothers who were successful in providing their children with education without the active involvement of a father, which comprised 73%. Findings in relation to how single mothers cope with emotional stress due to their inner selves and their children, revealed that 25% sometimes physically hit or smack their children, 16% often, while 59% never hit their children when they feel infuriated with their ex-husbands. Results of the study shed a positive light on single mothers as they displayed positive attributes despite experiencing emotional stress which is one of the causes of conflict within themselves.

Another study entitled 'Ibu Tunggal Muslim, Konflik dan Penyelesaian: Satu Kajian di Wilayah Persekutuan' (Single Muslim Mothers, Conflict and Resolution: A Study In the Federal Territory) was conducted by Rosmiza Omar (1997). This study aimed to obtain background information of single mothers, problems or conflicts they faced, and reasons for them becoming single mothers. Findings of the study indicated that most single mothers were between the ages of 30 and 45, with most having between 4 and 6 children. Conflicts that often arose within single mothers included emotional distress, financial problems, prejudice of society, problems with children, lack of knowledge and dilemma of remarrying. All these tend to culminate in an emotional disorder. Emotional disorder causes single mothers to lose direction and strength in forging ahead in life, resulting in the neglect of their responsibilities.

One of the most difficult responsibilities for single mothers to fulfill is in providing education for their children. A study where a majority of the respondents were single widowed mothers found that 72% out of 50 respondents indicated as such (Syarifah, 2003). The study also found that although most single mothers have jobs, 36% or 18 of the respondents have only primary school education, with a minority having either secondary or tertiary qualifications. Nevertheless, as a whole, single mothers do not face serious problems in fulfilling their responsibilities as head of the family and in providing education for their children. They were also able to cope emotionally, and able to face the negative perception of society towards single mothers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the context of becoming a developed nation in the year 2020, mothers play a significant role in human capital development. Mothers are the pulse or the main thrust to human capital development within a family. Nevertheless, how may the government's human capital development aspirations be achieved if single mothers are not able to function optimally due to the stress of endless life crisis? What is the profile of single mothers in Johor? What are the problems and challenges faced by single mothers? Are factors pertaining to economic, family, emotional and psychological stress, support or social stigma, the main challenges single mothers face? Is there a relationship between the source, duration, educational background, source of income and dependants, with the issues afflicting single mothers? In order to answer these questions, this study scrutinizes the issue by investigating the profile of single mothers and the challenges they face in life.

### **Objectives of the Study**

In particular, this study intends to identify the profile of single mothers in Johor and the challenges they face.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Profile of Respondents**

In terms of age profile, results of the study showed that 87% of the respondents comprised single mothers aged 41 years and above, 11% were from the 31-40 age group

while 2% were from the 21-30 age group. The finding of this study is contrary to that of Rosmiza Omar's (1997) who found most single mothers to be between 30 to 45 years of age. Finding of this study is also different from that of Mohd Ismail et. al.'s (2006) study which found that 70% of their single-mother respondents were in the age category of between 25 and 40 years old, while 30% were 41 years old and above. In terms of the reason for becoming single mothers, results of this study indicated that the highest reason was due to the death of a husband, which comprised 79% of the single-mother respondents. This was followed by divorce (17%), husband abandonment (1%), husbands who were ill and not able to provide maintenance (1%), and other miscellaneous reasons (2%). These findings are in line with the studies of Syarifah (2003), Mohd Ismail et. al. (2006) and Dr Aini Haji Idris (2012) who all found that the majority of women become single mothers due to the death of their respective husbands.

In terms of education level, a majority of the respondents do not have a high level of education. This is evident when the results showed that 12% of the single-mother respondents did not attend any form of formal education, while 26% and 42% of the respondents received primary and secondary education respectively. Nevertheless, 2% of the respondents admitted to having tertiary education, with 1% holding Doctor of Philosophy degrees. This finding is similar to Mohd Ismail et.al.'s (2006) findings, which showed 6% single-mother respondents have no formal education, 18 % have primary level education, 13 % have secondary level education, and only 3% have tertiary education. This indirectly has an impact on the education level of the single mothers' children. This was evident in the findings of Nur Ainun's (1997) study which suggests that single mothers' low educational background correlates with their children's low education level. The study in fact found that the single mothers had a low ability to provide education for their children, which stood at a 20% level, which explains why most children of single mothers tend to be less successful in life.

From the aspect of dependants, findings of the study indicated that the majority of single mothers (45%) have to support school going children, 17% have to support unemployed children, 8% need to support children studying at the tertiary level, 3% have to support children not of school age, while 1% have to support sickly children. This clearly shows that most of the single-mother respondents have to bear the responsibility of raising children. Such responsibilities need to be borne despite the fact that 35% of the respondents do not have any source of income, 40% have an income of less than RM 1000.00 (RM 200-950) per month, 23% have a monthly income of between RM 1000 and RM 2000, with only 2% earning more than RM 2000 per month. This suggests that the majority of single mothers are living in extreme poverty. This also implies that the respondents are in a dire situation in raising their children. The finding of this study is supported by the finding of Nor Ainun Ibrahim's (1997) finding, which found 30% of single mothers indicating that they feel burdened with the presence of their children following the absence of their husbands.

In relation to the source of income, the results showed that 27% of the single-mother respondents received financial support from their children, 23% received government assistance, 18% received alimony from their ex-husbands, 11% obtained assistance from other parties, and 7% obtained assistance from either their parents or close family members. This demonstrates that not all single-mother families receive government assistance, such as the 'Bantuan Rakyat I Malaysia (BRIM)' (I Malaysian Citizen Aid) which is given to low income families. This suggests that assistance does not reach all single mothers who deserved it. This situation should be rectified as one of the main challenges faced by single-mother families is economic problems, namely in the form of insufficient income to meet life demands (Syarifah, 2003). It should be noted that of the total single-mother respondents, 14% indicated that they did not receive any support from any parties. This finding reflects the fact that 73.3% single mothers face difficulties in obtaining government loans as start-up capital

(Che Noraini, 2010) who found that 73.3 % of single mothers struggle to get a loan from the government to start a business.

### **Challenges Faced by Respondents**

The results showed that the main challenge faced by single mothers are economic problems which showed the highest mean value of  $M = 28.85$ , followed by challenges due to emotional and psychological aspects, with a mean value of  $M = 27.09$ . Next, was the challenge resulting from social stigma, with a mean value of 25.17, and challenges which stem from family problems with a mean of 23.92. In relation to economic problems, 8% of the respondents were at a critical stage, while 77% were at a moderate level. This correlates with the previous findings pertaining to the profile of the single-mother respondents, which showed 35% have no source of income, 40% have a monthly income of less than RM 1000.00 (RM 200-950), 23% earn between RM 1000 to RM 2000 a month, while only 2% earn more than RM 2000. This suggests that the vast majority of the single-mother respondents in southern Malaysia live in extreme poverty.

These findings are consistent with the findings of several other studies (see Faizah and Hazirah, 2013; Syarifah, 2003; Diyana et. al.'s (2009), which showed that the main challenge faced by single mothers are economic problems. In addition, findings of this study supports the findings of a survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons ( AARP ), which suggests that the loss of financial resources is the main cause of concern among single mothers in their 40s. Results of this study also correlate with those of Crosier et. al.'s (2007) where they too found that financial problems were among the more serious issues afflicting single mothers, which could negatively affect the single mothers' mental health. Along the same vein, Rani (2006) postulates that being a single mother is a traumatic life experience due to stress in fulfilling the responsibilities in not only managing the household and raising the children, but also in providing financial resources. The importance of financial means in single-mother families was also highlighted by Wan Halim (1995), who asserts that single-mother families live in poverty as there is no economic support from the father.

The second issue afflicting single mothers, with a mean value of 27.09, is related to the emotional and psychological aspect. This finding supports the finding of Wang (2004) and Afifi et. al.'s (2006) which showed that divorced women have a higher tendency to suffer from psychiatric disorders compared to married women, and single unmarried women. Emotional and psychological issues have a higher tendency to afflict single mothers whose husbands had passed, as they feel lonely and empty with no one to share the ups and downs, and have lost a loved one whom they can depend on (Hamid, Mottan and Tyng, 2010). This finding is also similar to that of Crosier, Butterworth and Rodgers's (2007) study, entitled '*Mental health problems among single and partnered mother: The role of financial hardship and social support*', conducted on 354 single mothers and 1689 mothers with spouses or partners, which found a higher percentage of single mothers suffering mental health problems compared to women with spouses or partners. This is because single mothers reportedly face financial problems and enjoy less social support, compared to wives with husbands.

Another challenge faced by the single-mother respondents is society's lack of support and negative perception. Analysis of the collected data indicated the mean value pertaining to support issues and social stigma to be 25.17. This aligns with the work of Crosier, Butterworth and Rodgers (2007), which showed single mothers having less social support compared to wives with husbands. Likewise, Youngblut, Brady, Brooten and Thomas (2010) also believe that challenges afflicting single mothers are due to lack of support from individuals who play a significant role in their lives. According to Mohd Ismail et. al. (2006), not only do single mothers lack support from the society, they also suffer negative social stigma. In fact, their study indicated that social stigma towards single mothers is at a high level, with a mean value of 3.85. This social stigma has to a certain extent contributed to

some single mothers becoming prostitutes or apostates. This may lead to a prejudicial impression against single mothers as evidenced by the findings of Mohd Ismail et. al. (2006) which showed the question item "the society perceives me as deliberately looking for trouble, creating problems and giving a bad name to my family, race and nation" to have a mean value of 4.4.

Family problems, which showed a mean value of 23.92, also afflict single mothers. This problem tends to be related to issues of raising children. One challenge is in providing education for their children, with findings of the study indicating 45% of the single-mother respondents having to support the education of their school going children, despite 35% of the respondents not having any source of income and 40% living below the poverty line. It is thus obvious that single mothers are burdened in their effort to raise their children. This is consistent with the view of Devaraj (2011), who suggests that single mothers face difficulties in managing their children. Likewise, Nor Ainun Nor Ibrahim (1997) also found that the ability of single mothers in providing education to their children is at a low level of 20%, where in fact 30% of single mothers indicated that they felt burdened with the presence of their children following the absence of their husbands. Results of this study align with that of Mohd Ismail's (2006) finding which showed that 28% of single mothers felt unable to devote full attention to their children in their effort to inculcate positive values in the children. This is further supported by the fact that 63.4% of adolescents in single-mother families are at moderate neuroticism personality level (Syuaibatul, 2012). In fact, the children in single-parent families are more problematic than children who come from families with both parents (Deborah et al, 2003). The finding of this study is also in line with the study of Gove and Crutchfield (1982) who found that children from single-parent families displayed higher delinquency characteristics which indirectly make them more susceptible to social ills. Obviously, children who lack parental guidance and supervision have a higher probability to become involved in social ills (Nye, 1958).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Findings of this study indicated the main issues afflicting single mothers in Johor are economic problems, psychological and emotional problems, problem of social stigma and family related problems. This data can act as an essential input for relevant parties such as State Governments and the Bureau of Women's Affairs (HAWA) to plan strategies and actions in their endeavour to address the issues and challenges afflicting single mothers. In tandem with Vision 2020 towards Malaysia becoming a modern and progressive developed nation, it is imperative to develop Malaysian citizens who are able to support the country's aspirations in achieving this national vision. Thus, the role of a mother is very significant in shaping a family and formulating Malaysian citizens with identity and positive attitudes. To enable all single mothers to reach their full potential and fulfill their roles as effective mothers, those experiencing problems and challenges, particularly in relation to poverty, need to be assisted. The fact that this study found most single mothers do not receive any government assistance, despite 75% of the single-mother respondents living below poverty line, suggests that the government should review the assistance given to single mothers. The review particularly concerns the distribution of aid in the form of 'Bantuan Rakyat I Malaysia (BRIM)' or I Malaysian Citizen Aid, which is given to low income family. Review of the disbursement of BRIM should be implemented in order to ensure the aid is only given to those who truly deserve assistance.

Additionally, the government could ease the burden of single mothers through the inception of an education fund for the children of single mothers. This is timely as this study showed that 45% of the single mothers surveyed have school going dependent children. Through findings of this study, appropriate channels and assistance to children of single

mothers may be implemented in an endeavor to generate successful children from single-mother households. This effort cannot be understated as the success of these children in education is an effective means for single-mother families to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Results of this study also indicated that a majority of respondents did not have an education. This can impede their standard of living and can negatively affect their children who will inherit the country. A specific approach involving the participation and cooperation of all parties should be undertaken in assisting single mothers. The mobilization of single mothers through a particular organization is an example of a positive and appropriate action which could be implemented towards the effort of assisting single mothers to face challenges in life. Attitude of single mothers, as well as collaboration between state governments and volunteers comprising government officials, or members of the public who support the efforts of voluntary organizations like HAWA Consultancy Committee and Single Mother Association in the respective states, are important elements in addressing the challenges faced by single-mother families. It is only through such a concerted effort would the issues and challenges afflicting single mother be effectively addressed. Single mothers would then be liberated from poverty, psychological and emotional issue, negative social stigma and family problems.

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