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The silent struggle: A Qualitative study on the lives of Single Fathers

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of single fathers in Islamabad, Pakistan, with a focus on their struggles, coping mechanisms, and the complex realities of parenting in a traditionally patriarchal society. Using a qualitative research design, the study adopts an interpretivist paradigm to explore the subjective realities of single fathers, shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 single fathers, selected through snow ball sampling until data saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and insights within the narratives. The study also shedding light the difficulties single fathers encounter when they go from two-parent to single-parent households because of cultural norms based on traditional gender roles. The findings reveal themes such as emotional isolation, career and financial adjustments, societal stigma, and the redefinition of paternal roles. Despite their challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and a strong commitment to nurturing their children. This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on fatherhood in South Asian contexts and challenges dominant gender norms by giving voice to a marginalized parental identity. The research highlights the need for inclusive social policies and support systems that recognize and empower single fathers.

Keywords: Family, Single Fathers, Career Adjustment, Dual Responsibility, Socio- Psychological Challenges.



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Introduction

Family can be defined as a group of individuals who share legal or biological ties and coexist in the same space, collaborating to provide nourishment, childcare, and shelter. It is the predominant social unit, formed through parenthood, marriage, and shared residence. Social scientists recognize various family structures, reflecting the evolving nature of this institution. (Dawadi, 2019). The diverse structure and organization of family life in contemporary society are influenced by these complicated dynamics. Modern society's emphasis on the individual can result in the emergence of non-traditional family structures, such as single-parent families, deviating from conventional notions of the family (Sapek & Jevtic, 2019).

The percentage of families led by single fathers has risen in Western countries due to increasing divorce rates, separations, and spousal abuse. In the United States, the number increased from 12.5% in 2007 to 16.1% in 2017. The United Kingdom saw a gradual rise from 12.95% in 2010 to 15.06% in 2020. Denmark reported about 9,800 single fathers, including a notable case of one father having seven or more children. Conversely, Southeast Asian countries exhibit lower percentages, such as 2% in Cambodia and 3% in Myanmar, Timor Leste, and Viet Nam, according to a 2017 United Nations survey. Thailand reported 1.46% of single parents being single fathers in 2017, and in Malaysia, they constitute 6% of single-household families, while Singapore noted a decrease from 19.5% in 2015 to 18.3% in 2019, potentially influenced by family culture, traditions, and law (Arboleda & Singson, 2022).

Globally, there were major shifts during the 20th century, most prominently the dissolution of traditional family structure. One significant outcome of this change was the rise of single-parent homes, in which one parent took on the role of caregiver, as opposed to the traditional two-parent structure. Even in Pakistan, where there is a significant cultural emphasis on family values, unity, collectivism, togetherness, and relationship understanding, this phenomenon has become widespread globally. Unexpectedly, Pakistan has seen a significant rise in the number of single-parent households roughly 6% of all families (Waseem et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, the family court has recorded about 40,410 cases of parental separation, which led to the shift to single parenting. On the other hand, of the 320 million children worldwide, roughly one out of every seven children live primarily with a single parent family, most frequently their mother (Ali & Soomar, 2019). Single fathers constitute a minority compared to single mothers in Pakistan, yet the specific percentage remains undocumented. Notably, there is a dearth of research focusing on the life experiences of single fathers in the Pakistani context. This study, aiming to address this gap, seeks to comprehensively explore and understand the unique challenges and perspectives of single fathers, contributing valuable insights to the sociological research dynamics in Pakistan.

Objectives of Study

The primary objectives of this study were to explore the lived experiences of single fathers residing in Islamabad, Pakistan, and to understand the emotional, social, and economic challenges they face in fulfilling their parental responsibilities. The study aimed to examine how single fathers navigate their dual roles within a cultural context that traditionally associates caregiving with women, and how societal expectations and gender norms shape their parenting journeys. Additionally, the research sought to uncover the work family balance strategies adopted by single fathers and to highlight the support systems—or lack thereof—available to them. By investigating these dimensions through a qualitative lens, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of

single fatherhood and advocate for more inclusive narratives and within the domain of family studies.

Delimitation(s) of the Study

1. The study is only limited to Islamabad and cannot be generalized to other area or region.
2. The study is limited to divorced and widower single fathers who are upbringing one or more than one child.

Literature Review

Alexeevich and Alexandrovna (2018) presented the study on evaluation of Russian and international studies looking at the situation of single fatherhood. The study examines the parental behaviors of single fathers in Russian society, revealing shared characteristics across all sexes. Despite being a relatively recent reality, fathers can be effective parents, bearing heavy financial, legal, and social responsibilities. To promote effective single fathering and parental responsibilities, it is possible to build optimal social environments by incorporating inter-organizational resources and international expertise.

Albert (2018) studied the employment trends, Parental Responsibilities of American single fathers. The study reveals that when males become single fathers due to divorce or widowhood, their income and wages decrease. Although they still experience labor market changes, these decrease as their children grow older and leave home. This financial hardship negatively impacts their children's growth and education. Single fathers' actions highlight the effects of unexpected changes in parental status, as they are unaware of their future roles as lone providers and parents.

The study explores that there is variation among fathers' expectations about the workplace role in facilitating work-life balance; some believe the organization should actively support it, while others oppose employer intervention. Therefore, the class may play a significant role in how men manage their work and personal lives since professional men are more likely to plan their schedules and take advantage of workplace flexibility, making them appear to be "ideal workers" (Reid, 2015).

Iztayeva's (2021) study on single custodial dads highlights their challenges, including higher work-family conflict, worsened mental health, and lack of social support networks. The study suggests further research and policy assistance, and suggests the pandemic could rethink the care economy, potentially promoting gender equality in caregiving. employers expect single fathers to devote all of their time to their jobs, despite the fact that they are not "ideal workers" and have demanding family obligations. High-skilled males were in a better position to bargain for flexible work schedules. Conversely, low-wage workers were not, and in certain situations, this resulted in them losing their jobs.

The research illustrates that single father with white-collar jobs, supportive office settings, and access to flexible policies were better positioned to settle work-family conflict. These men appear to have been well-liked by their employers. Organizations are more inclined to accommodate professional men seeking flexible work arrangements for childcare reasons compared to those seeking flexibility for other reasons (Munsch, 2016).

Sepek and Jevtic (2019) mention that single fathers frequently deal with particular difficulties and prejudices from society while parenting their children. A study aimed to understand community attitudes towards patriarchal families. Single fathers face additional challenges due to traditional gender roles and societal standards. Research suggests that fathers can be equally successful as

mothers in raising their children. However, societal norms favor mothers as primary care providers. To support single fathers, society must acknowledge and encourage their significant role in their children's development. This can be achieved through affordable childcare, parenting classes, assistance groups, and work schedules that allow fathers to spend more time with their children. This will help single men succeed as parents.

Graf and Wojnicka (2021) investigate the connection between masculinity and fatherhood in male identities as fathers. Furthermore, Research on male perceptions of responsibility for parenthood and household care after separation has evolved, but gender stereotypes still exist. Fathers are now more active in providing for their families and developing empathy. Although male and female caring abilities vary, these inequalities become less significant after fathers adopt new roles. Fathering after a divorce can portray a sense of helplessness, unfairness, and dependence. Fathers' experiences are shaped by the mother's support, collaboration, and engagement of outside actors like authorities. Before separation, fathers were less active in emotional and physical aspects of caring, emphasizing the importance of learning to care by doing.

Shaukat and Rashid (2022) delved into the correlation between personal development, mental strength, and the caregiving load carried by single parents, focusing on the role of resilience. The research found a positive association between maturation and adaptability, and self-improvement was associated with a reduced caregiving burden. Balancing both parental roles can be challenging, especially for those with more caregiving responsibilities, which can impact their ability to handle stress and meet their obligations. Some single parents face difficulties caring for their children and fulfilling their tasks. To help single parents manage the pressures of caregiving and improve their lives and their children's. The study suggests that it's vital to promote awareness through different events and programs.

The study seeks to provide insight into the socioeconomic circumstances of male single parents in Elmina, Ghana, as well as their desire to remain single. A study of 360 male single parents found that over half were satisfied to remain single, influenced by age and years of single parenting. Older single parents were more likely to wish to remain alone than younger ones. Income and education levels did not affect this desire. The study highlights the importance of understanding and emphasizing male single parents and encouraging good parenting models that break gender stereotypes. This could lead to societal norms evolving and increased father involvement, ultimately promoting balanced gender ideals (Amissah, 2021).

Material & Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of single fathers in Islamabad, Pakistan. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the research was grounded in the ontological assumption that reality is socially constructed and subjective, and the epistemological stance that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between the researcher and participants. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 single fathers who were raising one or more children without a co-parent. Respondents were selected by using snow ball sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to emotional, social, financial, and cultural challenges. A thematic analysis involves multiple stages, including familiarizing with the data, coding, formulating themes, and interpreting the results. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The qualitative

approach allowed for a deep, nuanced understanding of the participants' personal experiences and the societal dynamics influencing their roles as single fathers.

Data Analysis

This study involved 17 key informants, & the majority were widowers, with 11 aged between 36 and 60, and 3 above 60. Living arrangements varied, with 8 in nuclear families and 6 in joint families. The key informants had varying numbers of children under 18. Education was a significant demographic characteristic, with 6 being illiterate, 2 having primary education, 2 having matriculation, 3 being graduates, and 1 having a master's degree.

The informants covered various occupations and jobs, including taxi drivers, vendors, laborers, property dealers, freelancers, clerks, lecturers, teachers, & government employees. The duration of single fatherhood varied, with individuals reporting varying timeframes from 4 to 25 years following their divorce or spouse's passing. This variation in experiences reflects the diversity in the experiences of single fathers in negotiating difficulties over time. Understanding the duration of time spent alone is crucial for understanding these men's experiences.

Father-Child Relationship

The father-child relationship refers to the level of attachment between fathers and their children. In a single-father family, the relationship between the father and children is particularly crucial because, in the absence of the mother, the father becomes the only permanent presence in the household, establishing a close bond with his offspring. A father invests a great deal of energy into forging a close bond with his children and filling the void created by the mother's absence.

"I have only one daughter who is very dear to me. I am not only her father but also her mother. She is my whole world. At the time of divorce, she was only four years old. As she grew up and matured, I decided to share my life's tragedies with her. My reason for telling her about my life is to ensure that no one shatters the trust my daughter has in me by providing her with false information."

This shows how a father performs his responsibilities beyond set societal standards and builds a close bond with his daughter. According to Currie & Sider (2013) the ability of fathers to form close, trusting relationships with their children is comparable to that of mothers. The relationship between a father and children is based on belief and admiration. As fathers start spending their time with children, their relationship becomes stronger. Children depend on their father for guidance and care, but closeness is missing. In doing so, the fathers gave their children more time together, which strengthens the bonds of affection among them and benefits the mental health of single fathers as well as the general development of the children. Engaging in child care is enjoyable for them, and it inspires them to provide for their kids' needs while also promoting social interactions (Arboleda & Singson, 2022).

Another respondent said:

"I have very good relationship with my daughters. I spend most of the time with them. They are very attached with me. My daughters are very watchful; in my work and in my household chores. I feel that I am role model for them."

Similarly, another respondent said that:

"I am unable to spend much time with my children, but I make a quick effort to approach them when they are in need. My primary concern is meeting the needs of my children, ensuring they never feel alone when facing danger or encountering any other problems."

In our cultural context, it is typically women who take care of their children and fulfill their caring needs. They spend the majority of their time with their children; build a close connection with them. However, in single father's families, the fathers take on the role of caring for the children, and as a result, they build a strong bond with them. According to the key informants, their relationship with their children is admirable, and they share a strong bond with them. They feel that their relationship with their children becomes even stronger as they fulfill their responsibilities as single fathers. In the presence of their mother, love for the children is distributed between both parents. Not only love but also the caring duties are now entirely their responsibility. They are the ones who must provide love and affection to their children. As a result, they find themselves more involved in the life of their children.

Challenges in Parenting as Single Fathers

Parenting a child is indeed a very demanding task, as it comes with a huge amount of responsibility for the parent. The future of an individual and society as a whole depends on how well they are raised by their parents. Raising a child can be challenging even in the presence of parents together. However, it becomes even harder when one of the parents is permanently absent from the family. This is especially true in cases where a father is left alone to handle all the responsibilities of home, child caring and job. Regarding challenges, fathers expressed the early challenges they face and the challenges they have to encounter throughout their journey in raising their children.

Fathers have to use different strategies to tackle with children of both genders. They have to take care of the children; both boys and girls require distinct approaches because their needs and emotions differ. Not only are their needs distinct from each other, but their emotional experiences also varying. Kabongo and Malose (2023) describe raising children as a single father involves navigating differences between boys and girls, with a strong belief in the essential role fathers play in their growth and academic success. Many believe that raising boys requires more attention and care compared to girls, who are considered easier to manage. Research has shown that boys tend to express their emotions less than girls, which calls for a stricter approach. Interestingly, fathers often struggle to manage their daughters' menstrual cycles and feel embarrassed seeking help from others. This perpetuates gender stereotypes and a limited understanding of the significance of menstruation, impacting parent-child relationships. One of the key informants stated that:

“I think that if you feed children with rightful and earned livelihood, there won't be any issues in their upbringing... raising a son in present time is difficult...some issues related to girls are unexplainable by father... girls care and love their parents more compared to sons.”

There were differences in the levels of involvement in childcare among fathers and mothers prior to separation. Fathers, particularly after separation, played a crucial role in caregiving, challenging conventional gender distinctions. The experience showed that, over time, fathers adapted and took on more responsibilities, diminishing the impact of biological differences on caregiving roles. However, following the separation, fathers acquire nurturing skills through practice and experience (Graf & Wojnicka, 2021). Practical experience is the best way for a person to learn. Everything is difficult at first, and it might not be simple at all. But with practice, things get easier to handle. In a similar way, males learn how to be good parents by working through obstacles and hurdles while assuming mothering duties.

“The difficulties usually occur at the beginning; you will be disturbed when someone leaves you, and children are still children. Now, there don't seem to be any difficulties. Now, I have setup routines. In the beginning, managing things can be difficult, but with time, I develop habit, and

then it becomes easier. Raising my daughters has been a very positive experience, and I've learned a lot."

Women have historically and in many different cultures been primarily in charge of caring for babies, attending to their daily requirements, and fostering their growth. However, major social and economic shifts in Western countries over the past few decades have changed the dynamics of families, with fathers now playing a bigger role in providing direct care and nurturing for their children whether they reside with the child's mother or not, men increasingly take up childcare duties. Throughout history and cultures, the role that guardians played has changed dramatically (Abraham & Feldman, 2018). In Pakistani society, it is not unusual to see dads assume the position of the only provider, managing childrearing duties on their own. Although they are less in numbers as compare to single mothers. The condition is frequently brought on by events like divorce or the tragic loss of a spouse.

"It's the daily chores like cooking, dishwashing, and laundry that can be challenging because they are typically women's tasks. As for taking care of the children, they tend to adapt well, even though it can be tough. A person eventually learns when responsibilities fall on their shoulders. You can provide boys with food and clothing, that's usually enough for them, but when it comes to daughters, you have to take good care of them. You can't just send them anywhere; it's a matter of their honor."

Examining how men view, define, and construct themselves as fathers, as well as how they navigate societal expectations surrounding fatherhood, is crucial given the diversity of cultural interpretations of fatherhood and fathers' everyday activities (Roy, 2006). In the beginning of men's new status, they may find it challenging to take on domestic responsibilities because societal norms often dictate that they rely on their mothers, wives, or sisters for daily needs. Their primary role is typically seen as fulfilling financial duties, rather than being responsible for childcare and household tasks. This doesn't imply that men are incapable or irresponsible; rather, this is a reflection of socialization, as men are used to their moms or sisters doing these chores prior to marriage. As a result, men may not have experience with tasks such as washing dishes, doing laundry, or cooking for themselves. After marriage, these responsibilities often transition to their wives, who may take on roles previously performed by their mothers or sisters. The division of household duties may shift further when the couple has children, as the wife typically assumes additional responsibilities related to childcare.

Fathers who will have to raise their children alone following the death or divorce of their wives face difficulties that go beyond basic household duties. One notable difficulty centered on the academic performance of the children. After the death of their mother, children become disturbed and unable to give proper attention to their education. Most of the key informants explain that they face challenges in children's education; they have to pay extra attention to their children. Some of them are even not successful in achieving the goal that their children perform well although they do a lot of effort. They not only face hurdles in the academic education of their children, but it's also difficult for them to educate, particularly their daughter, about their biological changes. Despite their friendly relationship with her, they are unable to guide them about their genetic transformation. The reason is that in our culture, mothers fulfill these responsibilities to guide them. Societal norms guide fathers about their role as protector of family. This relationship demonstrates societal expectations and points out the unique hurdle faced by single fathers in the absence of a mother figure.

Work Life Balance among Single Fathers

Work-life balance refers to a condition in which a person gives proper time to his job along with his personal life. Maintaining a balance between financial activities and family is valuable for all individuals, especially single fathers. It is crucial that they manage their time properly so that they give proper time to their family and work. In a single father's family, fathers have to perform the responsibility of mother alone along with his duties. They have to perform a dual role as a father, an earner for family, and a house taker; both tasks require proper concentration and dedication. They have to tackle dual responsibility, which are not only limited to earning or household chores but also to becoming role models for children.

The idea of work-life balance is based on the notion that personal demands and family matters can have an impact on work and vice versa. Problems at home can have an impact on work, and work can have an impact on personal life. This influence is reciprocal. In the simplest terms, work-family balance refers to how well a person manages their various responsibilities and finds a way to connect them that works for them (Kalliath & Brough, 2008). The key informant's response highlights the difficulties in attaining a work-life balance and is consistent with the literature's emphasis on the mutual influence of work and personal life. He stated that:

"I don't understand what to do. How can I manage the children and work? Everything seems difficult. There's no easy task. I have to manage the house and earn. I often get to work late, and sometimes I don't even go because of the children. I used to lock my children in a room and go to work; sometimes your mind doesn't work, so what to do?"

Another response aligns with the existing literature on the concept of a conflict-free life due to effective management skills. The key informant explained that his work does not interfere with his family life. He prioritizes maintaining a balance between work and family to ensure that everything runs smoothly. He shared that his ex-wife once acknowledged in front of others that he takes excellent care of the household and their daughters. He stated:

"I have to do all the household chores that are typically associated with women. I am also the sole breadwinner for my family. Now, I manage everything on my own. My work starts as soon as I wake up, and I organize my time according to the tasks I need to complete. Before the divorce, I used to work with my friend on workshops, but now I have to spend more time at home with my daughters. So, in the evenings, I bring in vehicles from the community and repair them at home."

There is variation among fathers' expectations about the workplace role in facilitating work-life balance; some believe the organization should actively support it, while others oppose employer intervention. Therefore, the class may play a significant role in how men manage their work and personal lives since professional men are more likely to plan their schedules and take advantage of workplace flexibility, making them appear to be "ideal workers" (Reid, 2015). Having a schedule is more suitable for permanent employed fathers to balance their lives. It helps them manage their responsibilities without any clashes. As he said,

"I teach at a technical college. When I finish my classes, I come home, prepare food, and my children return from school and college. Then, we eat together. Now, my children have learned household chores by watching me. When I have to go away from home, my children manage the household tasks themselves."

Fathers struggle to balance their roles as the primary provider for their families with their desire to be involved fathers, which includes spending time and interacting with their kids throughout the working day (Tanquerel, 2022). The body of research emphasizes how difficult it is for a single

father to strike a balance between providing for their families and being involved in their kids' lives. The key informant's narrative strengthens this concept by illustrating how the father actively fosters his children's independence while simultaneously maintaining a balance in life. He said that:

“My children were young; initially, the latch on the front door was high, so I lowered it, making it easy for them to open when they returned from school. I enrolled my children in Madrasa, and then I used to bring my sons along with me to work, teaching them the tasks I was doing. And when they turned 18, I arranged for their marriage.”

Work-family conflict incidents negatively impact parental effectiveness and well-being. Conflict between assumptions about the responsibilities of work and family can lead to work-family conflict for an individual. Although work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW) have a substantial correlation, they are different due to their own origins and effects, according to researchers. While characteristics of the family, such as the number of children and family engagement, are more highly correlated with FIW, work-related factors, including working hours and work support, are more significantly correlated with WIF (Eynde et al., 2020).

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of single fathers residing in Islamabad, Pakistan. These fathers are raising children alone due to divorce or the death of a partner and in absence of maternal figure. Despite the numerous studies on them worldwide that focus on the different life aspects of single fathers, there is a noticeable gap in research with in Pakistani context. Most studies are conducted in Pakistan about single parents, whose main focus are single mothers, with limited detailed exploration of the life aspects of single fathers. There is a need to understand the experiences of single fathers in context of Pakistan.

This study delves into the experiences of singles by emphasizing the father child relationship in the absence of a mother figure. The study highlights the fathers' dedication to building strong bonds with their children. The emotional well-being of these fathers is found to be significantly impacted by their active involvement in their children's lives. Despite the challenges of single parenting, positive outcomes are observed, with fathers expressing satisfaction and noting the benefits of close relationships with their children. However, the fathers acknowledge that, despite their efforts, they cannot entirely replace the maternal position.

The study shows that single fathers face the intricate challenge of maintaining a work life balance as they juggle the dual roles of provider and caregiver. The reciprocal influence of personal and professional life is acknowledged, with varied approaches to achieving this equilibrium. Balancing roles as a provider and an involved father is emphasized, underscoring the active fostering of children's independence. The nature of the job and family support significantly affect the ease of managing responsibilities. Achieving equilibrium involves diverse strategies and overcoming challenges in the pursuit of a balanced life.

Single fathers strategically adjust their careers to meet the challenges they face. The recognition of the need for personal and professional flexibility plays crucial roles in their journey. Stories from single fathers underscore the sacrifices and career adjustments made to prioritize family over work, revealing the clash between job commitments and demanding familial responsibilities. The impact varies based on job types and flexibility, with location also influencing job choices as

fathers seek proximity to their homes for better availability. However, this preference may bring financial constraints.

Findings revealed that financial stability for single fathers involves navigating challenges such as altered spending patterns and career sacrifices. The impact of irregular work schedules on income stability is evident, with daily wage earners facing additional hurdles. Sacrifices made for childcare responsibilities, including leaving well-paying jobs, underscore the complex decisions single fathers make. White-collar job holders with supportive environments experience relative ease in balancing work-family conflicts. The varying financial circumstances highlight the crucial role of effective time management and career choices in achieving stability amid shifting family dynamics.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the lives of single fathers in Islamabad, Pakistan, highlighting their unique experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in the absence of a maternal figure. The findings reveal that single fathers, despite societal expectations and traditional gender roles, are actively involved in nurturing and raising their children. Their dedication to maintaining a strong father-child bond plays a vital role in both their children's development and their own emotional well-being. While they report a sense of fulfillment and positive outcomes from their parenting efforts, the fathers also recognize the emotional and practical limitations of fulfilling both parental roles alone. The study underscores the need to broaden societal understanding and support for single fathers and calls for further research and policy development to address their specific needs within the Pakistani context. By giving voice to this underrepresented group, the study challenges existing gender norms and contributes to a more inclusive discourse on parenting and family structures.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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