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## **A New Form of Empowerment: The Changing Face of Single Mothers (A Sociological Analysis)**

**Tanaya Roy**

*Department of Sociology, CMP College, University of Allahabad  
(A Central University), Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India*

### **Abstract**

Women empowerment has many dimensions, which always keep coming up on different platforms and its results are also seen on the society. During discussions and contact on these issues, I closely felt some untouched aspects. I saw many women who are suffering the pain of being lonely but are ready to take their children to their goals on the capability of their will to live.

In the presented article, an attempt has been made to know and understand the problems and challenges related to the life of a single mother. One aspect of such women was also seen that, along with being financially capable, they are also mentally self-reliant. The social and legal rights of such single mothers will be discussed in this article.

**Key Words:** Single Mother, Single Parent Family, Single Mother Family, Problem and Challenges

### **Introduction**

A single mother family is a family consisting of a single mother and her dependent children. In a report of '**The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development**', a single mother is a mother who is divorced, separated, widowed, single, never married or living without a life partner. The term single parent family is different from the term female-headed family. A single parent family by definition can be either male headed or female headed. We can say that the family in which a single mother lives with her child or children or a single father with one or more children who are dependent on him can be called a single family.

Most single families are formed due to the death, divorce, separation or abandonment of one of the parents. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the single-parent families were formed due to divorce, while in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was seen that single-parent families were created due to the parents not marrying by choice. If we talk about the present scenario, the number of single motherhoods is gradually increasing due to which there are many

hidden reasons, maybe it is because of that today's modern Indian women has started assuming her husband as a life partner or friend instead of considering him as God. She is an intelligent woman well known about her duties, as well as also aware about her rights. She has her own identity and own ideology through which she understands and define the society and relations.

**Iravati Karve said** that, '*Family in India means joint family*'. According to Iravati Karve, "A joint family is a group of persons who generally live in the common house, who eat food cooked in the common kitchen, who are joint owners of property and who generally participate in worship and who are blood relatives of each other in some way or the other".

In the changing society, the number of joint families is continuously decreasing. In metros and big cities, the joint family is converting into 'nuclear family', but even today it is difficult to accept 'single parent family' or 'single mother family' or 'single father family' in Indian culture. Certainly, this changing form of the family institution cannot be justified, but after looking closely at this problem, it is clear that whatever be the reason behind the origin of nuclear families, but if its result is a lonely life, then that life must not be deprived of self-respect and self-esteem and we get to see a living example of this in the life character of Sita ji in Treta Yuga. Sita ji had to raise her sons alone despite being an ideal daughter, an ideal daughter-in-law, an ideal wife. Even today, Sita is alive among us as an ideal woman.

**As stated in a recent report released by the United Nations**, 4.5 percent of Indian families, which is about 13 million, are run by single mothers. The title of this report was "*Progress of the World Women" 2019-2020*", which presents a detailed analysis of the relationship between diverse family structures and women's choices. (UN Women Report, 2019)

Considering the accelerating number of single mothers the society is going to go one step further on women's rights and equality with making the mothers name mandatory in government documents like Academic certificates and ration card. Seeing the problems and needs of mothers single there is a debate all over the country about the elimination of father's name from the educational certificates. In a letter to the HRD minister Maneka Gandhi said "I had been approached by several women-single, separated or divorced. Who found it tough to get their child board and college certificates without revealing the child's father's name". She said that keeping in view the sensitively of the single/separated mother, we need to make a provision for this purpose by changing rules/guidelines, "**Gandhi said in the letter, and added that the rules must reflect the reality that "breakdown the marriages and separation between husband & wife" is a part of society** (Y. S Team, 2017).

**On 6 July 2015**, the Supreme Court gave an important decision regarding single mothers that no institution can even talk to the mother to enter the father's name in her child's documents. Earlier only couples could adopt a child, but in 2015, the "Ministry of Women and Child Development" issued the guideline of **CARA 'Central Adoption Resource Agency'**, which said that a single

woman can adopt a child of any gender, but a single man is not allowed to adopt a girl child. He can only adopt a boy (Team BBC Hindi, 2019). 'CARA' acts as a nodal body.

In the recent past, 16 children were adopted from **Rajkiya Shishu Graha located in Prayagraj Khuldabad**, out of which two children were adopted by two unmarried women. One of the two was a scientist from Varanasi and the other from Chennai. This shows that society is changing very fast.

In ancient India, an abandoned woman was considered a cursed woman, but today, Bhagirath efforts are being made to include her in the mainstream of society through law. Earlier, divorce was given by men only, but today in the changing times, when marriage or marital life becomes a sore for an educated woman, she herself wants to be free from this bond. Even today, when the initiative for separation comes from a woman, she is under suspicion throughout her life. If a family or relationship breaks, it is not logical to think that a woman is always responsible for it.

Even a single woman or mother has the right to be happy. Even today, somewhere or the other, marriage and motherhood are considered the most desirable and essential work for women. Any deviation from this is not welcome in the society or should we say not acceptable. Any government law or legal provision can be completely effective on the society only when the society accepts it, like the Sati system has ended but the dowry system is still in practice.

### **Problems and Challenges in the Journey of 'Single Mothers'**

Parenthood is challenging enough even under the best condition. So, being a single mother in our society is tasking to see the least. This is because, with one parent, the challenges are multifaceted.

In India single parents are mainly women who are widows. Willicox (2003) said in their study on "The Effect of Widowhood on Physical and Mental Health, Health Behavior and Health Outcome," that recently widowed women who were suffering from higher rates of depressed mood, poorer social functioning and lower mental health and physical functioning than women who were widowed more than a year. (Willicox S., 2003)

An understanding of the status of women in society is most vital to the issue of the families headed by single mother. Single mother has to face problems comes from multiple directions. While there is sympathy with the widow because of her "legitimates cause of single parenthood, there is often a social stigma attached to a divorced mother and children. Remarriages and acquiring share in her husband's property are very tough task for her. If she applies perfume, makes up, is happy or tries to stay, then every other person sees her with a question mark. Happy being single! What's the reason??

Because society still regards marriage and motherhood as the most desirable phenomenon for

women and any deviation from them is not welcomed. A mother who is single thought to be a failure, odd woman, a dropout, sexually weak or emotionally deprived. The plight of single parent is one of our most difficult social problems. This occurs because of death, divorce or separation. If it is any reason, it will affect the partner as well the children. (Kawar Praveen, 1989)

If the woman has not any support system, then the question of security always remains. If she is financially dependent, then raising a child becomes an even bigger problem, even if she is financially independent, it is still a difficult challenge for her to emotionally fulfill the absence of a father. Due to all these reasons, sometimes such women also become victims of depression.

Isolation, anonymity, namelessness becomes a general phenomenon in the daily routine of Single mother after divorce/widowhood because her acquaintance was associated with her husband's name. If single woman is a house wife, then it's become truer.

In ancient times, there used to be mostly joint families, single mothers were mostly widows, the mother and her children had to survive in the family in some way or the other. Today most of the families are nuclear consisting only of husband, wife and their children. The husband is the head of the family, after the death of the husband the woman suddenly becomes the head of the family. The expenses of children's education, admission, tuition, coaching, clothes, food and drink all fall on the shoulders of the woman and if the woman is a housewife, then this life becomes a tough road for her.

Employment becomes a necessity for her. Due to having full responsibility of the family, sometimes she does not like the job he does but under compulsion she has to do that job. In such a situation, sometimes women become psychologically weak and start becoming victims of depression. Their nature also becomes irritable and they also remain afraid of some untoward incident.

In today's time, it is very difficult for parents to raise children together. In the changing times where children see mobile, internet and social media as good friends which give them exposure, in such a situation, giving them the right values is also a big responsibility. Sometimes when a single woman is financially strong, she wants to compensate for the lack of a father in her child's life by providing comforts and facilities. Being a working professional, she is not able to give enough time to the children, hence sometimes the child gets spoiled while trying to fulfill every wish of the children.

The life of a single woman is very difficult, if she is an abandoned woman then she also tries to hide her truth from the society, for which she has to live her life with a false smile on her face, to show the world, along with being a single, he also has to observe fasts like Teej and Karva Chauth. By doing this she tries to avoid absurd questions from the society and she also does this

from the security point of view. If the society knows the reality of a woman, then sometimes even a woman's laughing and speaking is not considered positive and she is accused of being characterless.

A mother living alone with her children does not even have the right to call in sick. If by mistake she contracts a disease which is likely to cause infection, then this time is like a war for her. Like during the time of COVID, I saw that such mothers felt very helpless.

Amidst all this, raising children, responsibilities at home and outside, office work and maintaining relationships, a single woman is unable to find time for herself, due to which she starts growing before her age.

Single women have to face multidimensional challenges in their daily life. Lack of safety net affect most single mothers who don't have a support system. Society treated differently a single woman and a woman with her husband. Women often face illicit approached by other men, ranging from mild filtration, to subtle hints to sexual harassment. House chores, looking after kids and work barely leaves single mothers with the much deserved me time. Infect they often get it challenging to balance between their schedule and be completely involved with their kids' activities.

As children grow up, they want to know about their father. In school, college, when they see the father of all the children, their curiosity increases even more and they ask different types of questions to their mother. Like where is his family? who is his father? Answering these questions becomes even more difficult for unmarried and divorced women.

Akal Mata has to fulfill the responsibilities of a father along with mother, which she also tries to fulfill and is mostly successful, perhaps that is why most of the Akal men marry for the second time, but today even in the 21st century, most of the women do not marry for the second time and Gird up your loins for your children to enter the path of life prepares for struggles.

For the last three decades, the number of Akal Mata has been continuously increasing all over the world. Large part as a result of the growing number of children born outside of marriage. Unfortunately, there is no official information of number of single mothers.

Unfortunately, in India, the Ministry of '*Women and Child Development*' and the '*National Commission for Women*' are silent on this important issue. Even the '*National Sample Survey Office and the NITI Aayog*' has not done any study on this aspect. According to some studies, single mothers are living in a very pitiable condition with social, economic, cultural and psychological problems. It is the need of the hour to study the number and condition of such mothers in India. (Panda, P. K., 2017)

## Ways to Help Reduce Stress and Make Motherhood A Little Easier

Single mothers need to build a strong support system to make life not feel lonely. They should establish contact with other single mothers like her so that she can feel herself and her life normal. An online group or forum can also help. It is comforting to share advice with someone experiencing the same struggles.

No matter how busy life is, a single mother should take out time for herself. No doubt it is very tough task, but setting aside time strictly for yourself is absolutely essential to avoid burnout and fatigue. Ask your support system to assist with babysitting. At any cost they should take time for themselves. Seek professional help, whether psychological, financial, or general support. This could be a good way to reduce the pressure of single motherhood.

## Conclusion

Ultimately it can be said that the life path of a mother living a lonely life is not easy, she has to face various challenges and problems throughout her life. While managing a family alone is a big challenge in itself, when this challenge is presented by your own community, society and family, then life becomes even more difficult.

The community, family and law should support such a mother and to support such a mother, all they have to do is to change some old stereotypes and thinking. We have to accept that if a person is choosing a lonely life or is forced to live a lonely life, then it is not the fault of that person alone, and this statement does not change according to gender.

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