

Exploring Social Challenges Faced by Single Mothers: Loneliness, Social Support, and Community Influences

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The present study is descriptive in nature, aimed at exploring the social challenges faced by single mothers in two distinct blocks—Wapung and Saipung of the East Jaintia Hills District in Meghalaya. A total of 100 respondents were selected using simple purposive sampling, with 60 participants from Wapung and 40 from Saipung. The study examined key socio-demographic variables, including occupation, community composition, housing conditions, religion, and reasons for single motherhood, and how these factors vary between the two blocks. The study adopted standardised scales such as MSPSS and UCLA. Chi-square tests were employed to analyse the socio-demographic differences, while T-tests were used to assess variations in social challenges, particularly loneliness, and the perceived levels of social support. Findings revealed significant differences in social support systems and loneliness levels between the two regions. Single mothers in Wapung reported higher levels of loneliness but greater reliance on family and friends for support. Conversely, single mothers in Saipung experienced stronger support from significant others but had lower family support. Overall, Saipung respondents reported feeling more socially supported compared to those in Wapung. These findings underscore the role of cultural, economic, and regional influences on the social experiences of single mothers, providing valuable insights into the unique challenges they face in these communities.

Keywords: Single Mothers, Socio-demographic, Loneliness and Social Support.

A single-parent family is one where one parent is not present, either temporarily or permanently. In the past, these kinds of families mostly formed when one parent died from an illness, war, or an accident. Today, on the other hand, single-parent households are often caused by social and cultural factors like divorce, separation, or abandonment (Chamie, 2016). The cultural, family, and political situations of these families are different in each country (Rampell, 2010). In Meghalaya, women have traditionally had a higher social status than women in other parts of India. Even though this is an advantage, single mothers face unique problems because they often have to juggle many responsibilities. A big part of dealing with these problems is social

support, which is a complicated and changing idea. This support system includes both the structure of social networks and the things that people share with each other in those networks. Structure, according to Lin (2002), is the nature and frequency of interactions within a network, and resources, according to Due et al. (1999), are the material and psychological support that members of the network offer to one another. For single mothers, getting to and making good use of these support networks is important for keeping up with their responsibilities and getting through tough times.

Cognitive theory says that loneliness happens when people feel like they are missing out on social interactions they want to have (de Jong-Gierveld, 1987). This

difference shows how each person subjectively judges their social environment, which is shaped by their own experiences and the actions of people in their network. According to cognitive theory, there is an indirect link between having problems with social skills and feeling lonely. This link is mediated by how we see and judge things (Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Different stages of life can cause loneliness, but adolescence is a time when intense feelings of social disconnection are most common. For example, Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009) say that teenage girls feel lonely more than teenage boys. Researchers who have considered the lives of single mothers have found that they often feel lonely, helpless, hopeless, and low in self-esteem. Many avoid social events, change how they act or look because they are depressed, and have trouble sticking to routines and taking care of children when they don't have a male partner. These things can lead to a chain reaction of emotional and mental problems, such as trauma and depression (Jayakody, 2000).

Social support is very important for the health and happiness of single mothers, who have different problems than married mothers. Multiple studies show that single mothers often don't get enough emotional and practical support, don't have many chances to get help from their parents, and have unstable social networks. Not having a life partner, along with having money problems and fewer friends, makes them even more vulnerable. Studies by Crosier et al. (2007) and Bassuk et al. (1996) show that single mothers' mental health can suffer when they are socially isolated and don't get enough support. In the same way, Cairney et al. (2003) discovered that single mothers had less social interaction and less time spent with family and friends. Family and friends are still important sources of support (Lumino

et al., 2016), but there are still big gaps in how their different and sometimes conflicting needs are met.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Convoy Theory and Weak Ties

Kahn and Antonucci came up with the Social Convoy Theory, which stresses how people's social support networks change over the course of their lives. It talks about how important both close and far away relationships are for giving emotional, practical, and informational support. Examples include family, friends, and the community. For single mothers, strong social support can protect them from stressors like poverty, the demands of raising a child, and social stigma, which can improve their ability to cope and their mental health. Social network theory's idea of "weak ties," which goes along with "strong ties," is very important for understanding what single mothers go through. Weak ties, like friendships, coworkers, or community groups, are very important for getting access to a wide range of resources and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). These ties can make it easier to find work, find child care, and get help from the community, which adds to the immediate support that strong ties provide. For single moms, building a mix of strong and weak ties can help close systemic gaps, encourage social mobility, and make it easier to join more community networks. This study looks at how different socio-demographic factors, like the make-up of the community, job, and religion, affect the social problems single mothers face, especially when it comes to loneliness and finding social support networks. The study looks at these changes in different parts of the world to get a better idea of the physical and mental problems single moms face and how different kinds of social support can help them with all their needs.

Objective

To explore and compare the social challenges faced by single mothers in Wapung and Saipung, with a focus on understanding the impact of community composition, socio-economic factors, and social support networks (family, friends, and significant others) on their experiences of loneliness and perceived social support.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant association between community composition, socio-economic factors, and the levels of perceived social support (family, friends, and significant others) among single mothers in Wapung and Saipung blocks.
2. There is no significant difference in the experiences of loneliness and perceived social support among single mothers between Wapung and Saipung blocks.

Method

This study employed a descriptive and quantitative research design to examine the selected variables among single mothers in the Wapung and Saipung blocks of East Jaintia Hills district, Meghalaya. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants who met the predefined inclusion criteria. Data collection targeted single mothers aged 18 years and above residing in the specified blocks.

Instruments

Two standardized tools were employed for data collection:

1. *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)*: Developed by Zimet et al. (1988), the MSPSS assesses perceived social support across three subdomains: Family, Friends, and Significant Others. The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency with Cronbach's coefficient alpha values of .85 for the total scale, and .72, .85, and .75 for the subscales of Significant Others, Family, and Friends, respectively.

2. *UCLA Loneliness Scale*: Developed by Russell et al. (1980), this scale measures levels of loneliness experienced by individuals. The scale exhibited satisfactory reliability, with a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of $r = .73$.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality of the information was ensured. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. This methodological approach ensures a robust and reliable analysis of the research objectives, providing insights into the demographic and psychosocial differences between single mothers in Wapung and Saipung blocks.

Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Cultural Characteristics of Single Mothers in Wapung and Saipung Blocks

		Block				Df	Chi-Square (χ^2)	Sig.
		Wapung		Saipung				
Variables		N	%	N	%			
Age	18-23 years	5	8.30%	5	12.50%	4	1.091	0.896
	24-29years	10	16.70%	5	12.50%			
	30-35years	15	25.00%	10	25.00%			

	36-40years	20	33.30%	15	37.50%			
	41&above	10	16.70%	5	12.50%			
Resident	Own house	15	25.00%	21	52.50%	3	8.430	0.038*
	Family house	27	45.00%	10	25.00%			
	Relative house	12	20.00%	5	12.50%			
	Rented house	6	10.00%	4	10.00%			
	Type Of Housing							
	Katcha House	20	33.30%	19	47.50%	2	5.712	0.057
	Semi Paka House	27	45.00%	19	47.50%			
	Paka House	13	21.70%	2	5.00%			
CommunityBeite		0	0.00%	31	77.50%	2	68.220	<0.001**
	Khasi	10	16.70%	0	0.00%			
	Pnar	50	83.30%	9	22.50%			
Religion	Christian	39	65.00%	35	87.50%	1	6.315a	0.012*
	Niamtre	21	35.00%	5	12.50%			
Reason for Divorced		9	15.00%	0	0.00%	3	14.088	0.003**
Being	Saparete	26	43.30%	19	47.50%			
Single	Deserted	22	36.70%	11	27.50%			
	Widowed	3	5.00%	10	25.00%			

Note * and ** denoted significant at <0.001 and <0.05.

Table 1 showing the age distribution of single mothers in both Wapung and Saipung shows similar patterns, with the majority being in the 30–40 age range. Specifically, in Wapung, 33.3% of single mothers are aged 36–40, while in Saipung, this age group represents 37.5% of the population. This slight variation is statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 = 1.091$, $p = 0.896$), indicating that age distributions among single mothers are consistent across these regions. Significant differences in the type of residence are evident between Wapung and Saipung ($\chi^2 = 8.430$, $p = 0.038$). In Wapung, 45% of single mothers reside with their families, whereas, in Saipung, a larger proportion (52.5%) own their homes. This variation may reflect

socioeconomic disparities or distinct cultural practices in each block.

While the housing types (katcha, semi-pakka, or pakka) vary between Wapung and Saipung, these differences are insignificant ($\chi^2 = 5.712$, $p = 0.057$). However, a notable observation is that 47.5% of single mothers in Saipung live in katcha houses compared to 33.3% in Wapung, suggesting possible distinctions in economic conditions or housing availability.

Community composition exhibits a pronounced disparity between Wapung and Saipung ($\chi^2 = 68.220$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the ethnic and cultural diversity of these areas. In Wapung, the PNAR community comprises 83.3% of single mothers, while in

Saipung, 77.5% belong to the BEITE community. This division underscores the cultural specificity of each region, reflecting broader community and ethnic ties within each locality. Religious beliefs vary significantly across the two blocks ($\chi^2 = 6.315$, $p = 0.012$). Christianity predominates in Saipung, where 87.5% of single mothers identify as Christian, compared to 65% in Wapung. Conversely, a noteworthy 35% of single mothers in Wapung practice Niamtre, indicating a greater religious diversity in Wapung. The reasons for single motherhood differ significantly between Wapung and Saipung ($\chi^2 = 14.088$, $p = 0.003$). In Wapung, 36.7% of single mothers report being deserted, while widowhood is more common in Saipung, where it accounts for 25% of single mothers. Additionally, divorce is reported among 15% of single mothers in Wapung but is notably absent in Saipung, suggesting differences in marital stability or sociocultural acceptance of divorce across the two regions.

Table 2 reveal that a substantial proportion of single mothers in both Wapung

and Saipung possess low levels of education. In Wapung, 30% of single mothers are illiterate, compared to 32.5% in Saipung. Although Saipung shows a slightly higher percentage of mothers who have completed secondary education (22.5%) than Wapung (15%), this difference in educational attainment is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.224$, $p = 0.665$). These findings suggest that educational levels among single mothers in both regions remain broadly similar, with low literacy and minimal secondary education reflecting potential barriers to accessing education. The monthly income of most single mothers in both blocks falls within the range of 3000–5000, with no statistically significant difference in income distribution ($\chi^2 = 0.121$, $p = 0.941$). This consistency suggests similar income-generating opportunities and economic conditions across Wapung and Saipung, despite observed variations in employment types. Overall, the similarity in income levels implies shared economic constraints faced by single mothers, regardless of the specific job types available in each region.

Table 2. Educational Attainment, Occupation, and Monthly Income Distribution Among Single Mothers in Wapung and Saipung.

Variables		Block				Df	Chi-Square (χ^2)	Sig.
		Wapung		Saipung				
		N	%	N	%			
Education qualification	Illiterate	18	30.00%	13	32.50%	5	3.224	0.665
	Primary	7	11.70%	3	7.50%			
	Secondary	9	15.00%	9	22.50%			
	Higher Secondary	11	18.30%	7	17.50%			
	Diploma	3	5.00%	0	0.00%			
	Graduate	12	20.00%	8	20.00%			
Occupation	Daily Wages	9	22.50%	9	22.50%	4	40.310	<0.001**
	Venders	7	17.50%	7	17.50%			
	Helpers	3	7.50%	3	7.50%			

	Famers	14	35.00%	14	35.00%			
	Business	7	17.50%	7	17.50%			
Monthly income	below 3000	19	31.70%	12	30.00%	2	.121	0.941
	3000-4000	22	36.70%	14	35.00%			
	4000-5000	19	31.70%	14	35.00%			

Note * and ** denoted significant at <0.001 and <0.05.

Loneliness Levels

Occupational trends are alike in both Wapung and Saipung, where farming is the predominant occupation, employing 35% of single mothers. This is followed by daily wage labor, which accounts for 22.5% in each area, and vending as another common form of employment. However, the chi-square analysis ($X^2 = 40.310$, $p < 0.001$) reveals significant differences in job types between the two blocks, indicating possible economic or regional variations influencing occupational choices among single mothers.

Table 3 illustrates a marked difference in loneliness levels between single mothers in Wapung and Saipung, with Wapung showing a notably higher average loneliness score of 64.75 compared to Saipung's 46.80. The substantial difference of 17.95 is reinforced by a highly significant T-value of 10.83 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that single mothers in Wapung experience significantly greater loneliness than their counterparts in Saipung. This disparity could reflect underlying social or environmental factors unique to each region, which may influence the experiences of isolation among single mothers.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Loneliness and Social Support Among Single Mothers in Wapung and Saipung Blocks.

Variables	Block	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	T-value	P-value
Loneliness	Wapung	60	64.75	6.683	17.95	10.83	<0.001**
	Saipung	40	46.8	9.903			
MSPSS	Wapung	60	43.32	2.728	-2.258	-3.8	<0.001**
	Saipung	40	45.58	3.169			
Significant others support	Wapung	60	8.3	1.169	-11.100	-26.387	<0.001**
	Saipung	40	19.4	2.933			
Family support	Wapung	60	18.8	1.754	7.300	22.872	<0.001**
	Saipung	40	11.5	1.219			
Friends support	Wapung	60	16.22	1.329	1.542	5.930	<0.001**
	Saipung	40	14.68	1.185			

Note * and ** denoted significant at <0.001 and <0.05.

Social Support (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) reveals that single mothers in Saipung report slightly higher levels of perceived social support, with an average score of 45.58, compared to 43.32 in Wapung. While the mean difference of 2.258 is small, it is statistically significant ($T = 3.8, p < 0.001$), suggesting that single mothers in Saipung perceive slightly more overall social support. This finding points to a marginal but meaningful difference in social resources or community support structures between the two blocks.

Support from Significant Others

When examining support from significant others, single mothers in Saipung report substantially higher scores (19.4) than those in Wapung (8.3), with an impressive mean difference of 11.1. The T-value of 26.387 underscores the significance of this finding ($p < 0.001$), highlighting that single mothers in Saipung receive markedly more support from significant others. This pronounced difference suggests that interpersonal relationships outside the family structure may play a more central role in Saipung, offering single mothers a crucial support network that is less accessible in Wapung.

Family Support

In contrast, family support is notably stronger among single mothers in Wapung, where the average score is 18.8, compared to 11.5 in Saipung. This difference, with a mean of 7.3 and a highly significant T-value of 22.872 ($p < 0.001$), suggests that family members are a primary source of support in Wapung. This reliance on family may indicate cultural or socioeconomic factors that strengthen family ties in Wapung, providing single mothers with a more immediate and reliable familial support system than in Saipung.

Friend Support

Lastly, in terms of support from friends, single mothers in Wapung again report slightly higher scores, averaging 16.22, compared to 14.68 in Saipung. Although the mean difference of 1.542 is modest, it is statistically significant ($T = 5.930, p < 0.001$), indicating that friendships may provide somewhat greater support to single mothers in Wapung. This suggests that Wapung's social dynamics may foster friend networks that offer emotional or practical support for single mothers, albeit to a lesser extent than family support in this region.

Discussion of Main Findings

The study's primary objective of exploring and comparing the social challenges of single mothers in Wapung and Saipung reveals key insights into how community composition, socio-economic factors and social support networks shape their experiences of loneliness and social support.

Loneliness and Community Composition

The present study highlights a significant difference in loneliness scores between single mothers in Wapung and Saipung, emphasizing the role of community composition and social integration in shaping well-being. Single mothers in Wapung report substantially higher levels of loneliness, which may result from specific social or cultural dynamics in the community. This heightened loneliness could reflect fewer opportunities for social interaction or weaker community support, suggesting that the cultural environment in Wapung may not be as inclusive as in Saipung. Social support plays a critical role in mitigating loneliness among single mothers. According to Haga et al. (2012), perceived social support is inversely related to feelings of loneliness, meaning that a strong support network can significantly enhance emotional well-being.

Similarly, Valtchanov et al. (2014) note that cultural changes, such as increased workforce participation among women and higher rates of single parenthood, have contributed to greater social isolation among young mothers. Moreover, a lack of social support is associated with poorer health outcomes for single mothers. Rousou et al. (2013) found that limited support networks negatively affect physical and mental health. Additionally, Hudson et al. (2016) showed that low-income adolescent single mothers are particularly vulnerable to loneliness due to inconsistent support systems, which can harm their self-esteem and overall mental health. These findings collectively underscore the importance of fostering strong, inclusive community networks to support single mothers and enhance their well-being.

The Impact of Socio-Economic Factors and Support Networks on Loneliness Among Single Mothers

The socio-economic challenges in Wapung and Saipung, including low education levels and limited income, significantly shape the support networks of single mothers in these regions. In Wapung, single mothers heavily depend on family support, reflecting strong cultural and socio-economic reliance on kinship ties. Although support from friends exists, it does not fully mitigate the higher loneliness levels reported in this community. In contrast, Saipung single mothers benefit from stronger support from significant others and a slightly higher overall perception of social support, indicating more robust relationships outside the family that help reduce loneliness. Research consistently highlights perceived social support as a crucial factor in managing stress and coping with parenting challenges. Studies by Park and Lee (2022) and Bahadur (2023) found that higher perceived social support correlates with lower levels of stress

and depression among mothers. However, single mothers often perceive less adequacy in their support networks compared to married mothers. According to Lumino et al. (2016), this disparity significantly impacts their mental health and coping abilities.

The absence of a life partner, coupled with financial hardships and limited social circles due to multiple responsibilities, exacerbates these challenges. Crosier et al. found that financial struggles and a lack of perceived social support are key contributors to poor mental health among single mothers. Similarly, Cairney et al. reported that single mothers have less contact with family and friends and are less socially engaged than their married counterparts. Despite these limitations, kinship ties and friendships remain essential survival strategies for single mothers, as they help meet their basic needs (Lumino et al.). These findings underline the importance of enhancing both the quality and perception of social support networks to improve the well-being and resilience of single mothers.

Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the social challenges faced by single mothers in Wapung and Saipung, with a focus on community composition, socio-economic factors, and social support networks. The findings highlight significant differences in loneliness and perceived social support between the two regions, shaped by variations in cultural dynamics and social integration. Single mothers in Wapung reported higher levels of loneliness, likely due to fewer opportunities for social interaction and less inclusive community support compared to Saipung. These findings emphasize the pivotal role of community composition in shaping well-being and highlight the need for fostering inclusive and supportive environments.

Socio-economic challenges, including limited education and income, significantly influence the structure and efficacy of support networks. In Wapung, reliance on family support remains predominant but insufficient to mitigate loneliness fully. In contrast, Saipung single mothers benefit from more robust relationships with significant others, contributing to better emotional well-being. The study underscores the inverse relationship between perceived social support and loneliness, consistent with prior research, and emphasizes the importance of strong support networks in reducing stress and improving mental health. The findings highlight the critical need to enhance both the quality and perception of social support systems for single mothers, addressing not only familial ties but also broader community and institutional support mechanisms. By addressing socio-economic barriers and fostering inclusive communities, stakeholders can play a crucial role in improving the well-being and resilience of single mothers in these regions. Future interventions should focus on strengthening community networks and providing targeted support to reduce loneliness and enhance emotional and social well-being.

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