

## **Challenges and Coping Strategies of Single Parents: Case Study of Barkin Ladi Local Government Area of Plateau State.**

**Keswet, L. A.**

Department of Science and Technology Education  
Faculty of Education,  
University of Jos, Jos  
and

**Dapas. A. E.**

Department of Home & Rural Economics  
Plateau State College of Agriculture  
Garkawa

### **Abstract**

The major purpose of the study was to identify the major challenges and coping strategies of single parents in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State. The population was made up of single parents in the LGA. Qualitative data were collected using focus group discussion (FGD) guide. Findings reveal a total of seven causes of single parenthood in the area, eleven challenges faced by single parents and seven coping strategies employed by the parents. Based on the findings, four major recommendations for promoting family survival and stability were made.

### **Introduction**

A parent is one who begets, gives birth to and nurtures a child. Parenting involves providing care, support and love in a way that leads to a child's total development (Hilderbrend, 1997; Berger, 2005). This means that parents are responsible for a child's physical needs, while creating a nurturing environment of

attention, encouragement and love. Thus parenting involves meeting the child's physical, mental, emotional and social needs.

The concept of parenthood involves some basic role expectations like bearing and rearing children, socialization, economic activities, religious obligations and other civil duties acceptable by the society.

Types of parenthood as listed by Hildebrand (1997) include: biological parenthood; adoptive parenthood; step parenthood; foster parenthood; and legal guardianship. The application of the concept of parenthood, however, differs from culture to culture.

Single parenthood involves a sole parent who cares for children without the help of the other parent (Ward, 2001). A single parent family is, thus, a nuclear family where one or more children are nurtured by either a father or a mother. Such a family is often referred to as father/mother headed family (Igba, 2006). In such situation, the remaining parent not only inherits the responsibilities of the missing parent, but also takes custody of their children, in addition to his/her own roles as father or mother (Sanchez, 2007; Ezeigbo, 2001). The goal of single-parent family is that of raising a child who feels positively attached to his care-giver and is free from undue anxiety to play and learn (Berger, 1987). There could also be a situation where a woman, for instance, decides to have and nurture a child on her own, while remaining unmarried or single.

Single parenthood could result from the death of a spouse or divorce. There are also other instances when single parenthood occurs involuntarily as a result of rape. There are many causes of single parenthood in both developed and developing countries of the world.

Other causes of single parenthood include: death of a parent, wars and violent crises, rape and sexual harassment (International Displaced Monitoring Center, 2008; Preventive and Social Medicine, 2005). Hildebrand, (1997), reported that about 25 percent of all parents are single parent- families in the United States of America. Most of these families (84 percent) were headed by mothers, while about 16 percent are headed by fathers. A health report on the United States divorce rate also show that approximately 40-50 percent of all teenagers are living with single parents (Ward, 2001; Sanchez, 2009; Hunt, 2009).

In Nigeria, available reports indicate that single parent family is an evolving phenomenon (Salami and Alawode, 2010; Nwachukwu, 1998). The reports also noted that until recently, there were no available data on single parent families in Nigeria. Other reports show a high rate of violence, divorce, rape, teenage pregnancies, diseases, including HIV/AIDS and the outcome of industrialization and urbanization, all resulting in single parenthood (WHO, 190-1994; Ezeigbo, 2001; and Alhassan, 2009).

Single parent families face various challenges. Some challenges of single parenthood include; childcare and training needs, child support enforcement, loneliness, and psychological problems (Uchendi, 1996; and Mayer 2009). Others are:

career challenges, insecurity and dating (Sanchez, 2007 and Pankow, 2007). The children raised by single parents may also face challenges of ridicule by friends, lack of educational support, lack of father/mother figure, lack of mentors, and a greater exposure to sexual abuse by members of the opposite sex, etc.

Although many studies exist with regard to causes of single parenthood, the records available are basically those from the developed countries of the world. The differences in culture, societal norms, etc; between developed and developing countries could suggest that issues relating to single parenthood in the developed countries could differ from those relating to the phenomenon in Nigeria. It is, thus, necessary to study issues relating to single parenthood in Nigeria. Available studies on single parenthood in the Nigerian context have not focused on causes and coping strategies especially in the area of this study (Uchendu, 1996; Nwosu and Ighorodje, 2007 and Alhassan, 2009). The crises in Plateau State (1994, 2001, 2008, to date), have contributed negatively in increasing the death toll of many parents and children. This has contributed in increasing the number of single parents in Barkin Ladi local government area, because it is part of Jos north senatorial zone (Best, 2008). A study on the challenges and the coping strategies of single parent families in Nigeria could help in

evolving ways of support for the families.

### **Purpose Of The Study**

The major purpose of the study was to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of single parents in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State. Specifically, the study

- identified the major causes of single- parenthood in Barkin Ladi LGA.
- identified the challenges of single parents in the LGA
- determined the coping strategies used by the single parents in the LGA.

### **Methodology**

*Area of the Study:* The study was a survey which used qualitative technique to generate data. The area of the study was Barkin Ladi LGA of Plateau State. It consists of twenty wards and is located in Jos north, in the Northern senatorial zone of Plateau State.

*Population for the study:* The population of Barkin Ladi LGA is 175,267 according to the National population commission (2006). The target population was single parents (women) in Barkin Ladi town, who were living with their children. They include divorced/separated, widows, teenage and unmarried single women. Those not living with their children at the time of the study were excluded.

*Sample for the study:* A focused group discussion technique (FGD)

was used for data collection. Four zones were created out of Barkin Ladi town and ten single parents were selected purposively from each of the zones, making a total of forty persons. The age bracket of the participants ranged between twenty and fifty years of age. Ten of the women were illiterates; fourteen had attended primary school, ten up to secondary school, while six had at least gone to a post secondary institution. Twelve of the discussants were civil servants, six business women, while the others were farmers and traders. All the women worked an average of eight to ten hours per day. Ten of the discussants had at least two children, fourteen had between six and four, ten between five and six and six of them seven children each.

**Instrument for data collection:** A focused group discussion guide was developed based on the specific purposes of the study. The instrument was subjected to validation by two family living experts.

**Data collection and analysis techniques:** Four FGD sessions were conducted in the four zones of the study. Each group was made up of ten single parents. Each session lasted for two hours. The researcher acted as a facilitator. There was a recorder. A tape recorder was also used. The information gathered in the four sessions was summarized.

### **Findings of the study**

The following findings were made:

- A. Seven major causes of single parenthood in Barkin Ladi LGA. These are:
  - Violent crisis/war/civil disturbances/accident.
  - Rape and sexual harassment.
  - Divorce/separation.
  - Sickness/disease.
  - Teenage pregnancy.
  - Desertion by one parent
  - By choice as a result of personal experiences.
  
- B. Eleven major challenges faced by single parents in Barkin Ladi LGA. These are:
  - Drug abuse, drunkenness and mental derailment.
  - Lack of cooperation from in-laws.
  - Financial problems (basic needs).
  - Lack of security.
  - Rejection due to partner's cause of death.
  - Emotional distress.
  - Aborted life aspirations and fear of the unknown.
  - Gangsters/secret society/cult/armed robbery.
  - Exhaustion due to lack of house help.
  - Perverted liberty.
  - Denial of widow's right.
  
- C. Six coping strategies used by single Parents in Barkin Ladi LGA. These are:
  - The formation of a parent-children quarterly discussion group to foster unity among parents and children.
  - Counseling by pastors and other

- fellowship groups.
- Financial help from the church and other fellowship groups.
  - Loan schemes/ contributions.
  - Participation in skills acquisition workshops organized by the government, church groups and other non-governmental agencies both within and outside the LGA.
  - Extra-income ventures: such as sewing, soap production, poultry and animal production, among many others.

### **Discussion of findings**

The causes of single parenthood in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area are diverse, as also recorded by other researchers like Ward (2001), Mayer (2009), and Salami and Alawode (2010), especially in relation to the frequency of occurrence. This may be particularly so because of the many violent crises that has been occurring in Plateau State since 1994 to date. Ten out of the forty discussants indicated that they were single as a result of the crises; this was also reported by The International Displaced Monitoring Center, (2008) and Best, (2008) as occurring in many African countries.

The three most challenging issues affecting single parents in the LGA, according to the discussants and in order of occurrence were insecurity, financial problems, and rejection due to husband's cause of death. About twenty four of the women (60%), for example, wish to re-marry because of

financial challenges. These agree with other studies by WHO (1990-1994), Nwosu and Ighorodje (2007) and Alhassan, (2009), although there are some of them that are more unique to the African culture. Six of the women bursted into tears and said "because our husbands died of HIV/AIDS, we can never be able to re-marry. We are seen as out cast'.

The non- availability of loan schemes from health and financial institutions and the non availability of social security programmes as it is in other developed countries ( N w o k e , 1 9 9 6 ; Berger,2005;Renee,2006),cause serious challenges to single families in Africa and particularly Nigeria.

Coping strategies used by other developed countries may or may not be the same with those used in developing countries because of the economic opportunities, social amenities and other counseling facilities available. However, single parents in Barkin Ladi still employed strategies like getting extra jobs to earn additional income. The implication of this to the family is that both parents and children work all through the day and may not have enough time to interact with each other. This could lead to stress and over exhaustion as noted by Renee (2006) and Hunt (2009). The respondents use the cooperative loan scheme, local weekly and monthly contribution scheme which they call "Adashe" to meet some of the family

needs. This may however have the implication of keeping the family in perpetual debts, as they keep collecting such monies and spending them on family needs.

Life must continue, therefore, many single parents employ ways of survival despite the challenges. Some economic survival strategies from the FGD discussants include: -

Belonging to a discussion group: - Most single families recover fast as they share their problems with other single families. It helps them adopt methods that others (Berger, 2005; Hunt, 2006; Renee, 2006) have discovered to work for them through experience. They also seek counseling through churches, friends, non-governmental agencies and associations, and cooperative saving Schemes. Many Single Parents seeks loans from relations, friends and cooperative societies to start small-scale businesses that can sustain the family e.g. farming, trading, learning of new skills like sewing, dyeing of fabrics, handcrafts and poultry production.

Diversification - Many single parents and their Children keep their jobs and also engage in extra-activities like farming, poultry production, animal production and rearing, and the production of local snacks and drinks(e.g. alele, kosai, dakuwa, zobo, kunu), just to mention but a few. Those who have grown-up children also involve them in the family business for extra-income. This is in

the effort to increase their earnings. This also agrees with other studies by WHO, 1990-1994 and Mayer, 2009. Most single parents go into small savings schemes (Adashe) where few people come together and contribute daily, weekly or monthly and such monies are collected in turns to enhance their businesses and to pay school fees or meet essential needs.

### **Conclusion**

Single parenting is a world development that every society has to get used to especially due to global changes, socio-cultural, economic situations and changes in family living. The gradual management from a traditional family system to a mixture of family styles is gradually becoming acceptable in the Nigerian society due to many challenges such as high divorce rates, separations due to death, natural disasters of various types, urbanization, civil and religious crises. The knowledge of such changes will help the next generation of parents to prepare positively for the challenges of raising children and adjusting economically during periods of depression as experienced in the past few years.

### **Recommendations**

The FGD discussants came up with the following recommendations. They are necessary for information in order to enhance the quality of life of all family members and the community at large for better survival.

- All single parents should be very prudent with their finances to avoid financial crisis. Married couples should always bear in mind that one day a partner must die or depart and as a result should start planning for widowhood as soon as they are married. It may also be important for parents and members of the community to educate their children on these basic facts of life.
- Single families must learn to be careful with all the friends they interact with, especially the married. This is to avoid being led astray or falling into temptation.
- Single parents should be busy and industrious so as to avoid idleness and over dependency on people.
- They should be more committed to spiritual activities in order to expand their source of encouragement and also allow their children to interact with others who have both parents alive.
- Children (especially young ones) should be drawn closer to enable them to express their dissatisfactions and frustrations. This will also help their parents to be aware of the friends they associate with in case of bad influence.
- Single families are advised to reject all negative notions and beliefs about single parenthood and develop their own unique families with love. They are also advised to be contented and to keep trusting in God.
- Finally, families are advised to let go of all anger and from relationship with friends and those that remind them of their past hurts or forgive them and continue with their new lives again.

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