

Family Background and Single Parenting among Unmarried Mothers in Nigeria

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Abstract

Families serve as the initial point of contact since one of their primary responsibilities is socialising children according to societal norms. Generally, the parents have to educate and rear their children in line with these standards and principles, overseeing the child's social, psychological, and emotional well-being. However, because of divorce and separation, the responsibility often falls to a single parent, typically a woman. This research aimed to better understand the experiences of unmarried women with children by examining their socialisation and lessons learned from their familial backgrounds. Thirty key informants recruited via a Facebook group of single mothers were interviewed in Nigeria. Findings were subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis and the findings suggest that the decision to stay unmarried while having children owed partly to their upbringing and experiences of male molestation and violence. That the women chose to remain single as with how their mothers and role models were treated their husbands evinces that the upbringing received from parents

significantly impact the direction of the women's lives. To obviate single parenting, the study suggests that girls should be educated from a young age on the importance of embracing two-parent families to ensure the well-being of their children.

Keywords: *Family background, Nigeria, single parenting, socialisation, unmarried single mothers.*

Introduction

The question of what comprises a family has often been the subject of debate, not only in a discourse on the sociology of the family but also in religious, demographic, and political contexts. From the conservative standpoint, family is seen in terms of structure, specifically a nuclear family where each member - father, mother, and children - fulfils certain roles. For Galland (2020), as with Edem and Lynn (2020), family is based on the relationships among its members rather than the rigid allocation of status roles dictated by popular convention. Sociologically, the term 'family' refers to a social unit or group composed of people related by blood, adoption, or marriage, which builds an emotive connection among members and serves as an economic unit of society (Parul, 2015). However, in recent years, the prevalence of single-parent families has become more common, surpassing the conventional nuclear family comprising a father, mother, and children (Lorretta and Ntoimo, 2019). This family system where either the father or mother assumes responsibility for the children's socio-economic demands, is gradually being embraced by society, leading to a shift away from the roles and functions traditionally associated with two-parent family in socialisation (Barber, 2012). While the family is considered the basic unit of society (Cotton, 2019), rapid and significant changes have led to the decline of the traditional nuclear family. Consequently, single or lone-parent families have become more visible and accepted as a legitimate family type (Issa, 2018).

Much data on the prevalence of single parenting in Sub-Saharan Africa is unavailable. However, data from the National Population Commission (2019) showed the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of single parenting in the African region. These findings show that more than 22% of women aged 20-49 in Africa were unmarried mothers in 2018. Major variables promoting single parenting among women in the region included place of residence, degree of

education, income, age, their mother's history of intimate partner violence, employment, and access to media. According to the Nigeria Data Portal (2018), Nigeria's population by marital status is 50.01%, unmarried is 46.44%, widowed is 1.97%, divorced is 0.72%, and separated is 0.86%. Among the multidimensional deprived population, the unmarried are the most vulnerable to higher risks of poverty, poor health, and negative emotional and social outcomes for children (Adejoh et al., 2019). Although several studies demonstrate the effects of the sexual and reproductive behaviours of unmarried teens in Africa, little is known about unmarried women with children (Miller and Ridge, 2010; Whiteman et al., 2001). Consequently, there is a growing body of research on women who have not been legally married but are pregnant or have recently given birth.

Adewoyin, Awelewa, Uzoma and Anazonmu (2021) found that single mothers in Nigeria constitute 9.5% of the global population, making Nigeria, spanning its varied ethnic configuration, one of the nations with the highest prevalence of single mothers globally. Akinyemi and Wandera (2020) reported the prevalence at the national level, with 2.9% in the Northern and 2.3% in the Southern regions. This prevalence has led to children developing poor emotional states (Adebowale, 2019) and facing bullying and stigmatisation from members of society (Alaba, Olubusoye, and Olaomi, 2017). Consequently, being a child from such a home is challenging, leading to the adoption of different coping strategies such as absconding from school (Adewoyin, Chukwu, and Sanni, 2018), exhibiting violent behaviours (Haruna-Ogun, 2018) and showing signs of personality disorders among others.

Demographic evidence from UNICEF (2017), recently corroborated by Crabtree and Kluch (2020), shows that an overwhelming majority (80% plus) of single parents are women. This trend is attributed to the combined effect of an increase in separation and divorce and a declining remarriage rate after marital issues with their spouses. Baley, Sweeney and Wondra (2015) and Elo (2019) observed that in Africa, the proportion of births outside marriage often to mothers who have not been married is increasing. Factors contributing to this trend include high cases of unprotected sex, educational attainment, as well as increased social and economic independence, which have diminished the perceived necessity of marriage for survival.

Scientific and current literature in Nigeria align with several regulations and earlier studies that define single parenting as a detrimental occurrence with negative social, economic, and health effects

on both women and their children (Ibrahim et al. 2021; Yanuarsari et al., 2021). The rise of single parenting is largely attributed to modernisation and the increasing need for women's independence due to their participation in the labour market. Ongoing studies continue to highlight the negative conceptions about single parenting, particularly for women (Hertogs et al., 2021; Fotoh, 2021; Folorunsho and Tanga, 2021; Akaito and Musa, 2020).

Marriage, traditionally regarded as a sacred union between two individuals who voluntarily commit to legal matrimony, faces evolving perspectives in contemporary Nigerian studies. Besides procreation, marriage serves purposes such as companionship and relationships, where each spouse typically plays a unique household role. However, the collaborative effort in raising children and instilling moral discipline has historically been recognised as preferable due to the financial and emotional benefits of two-parent involvement.

The central focus of this study is the influence of family background on single parenting. Oluwaseyi et al. (2019) observed that cognitive outcomes in children, are directly influenced by single parenting. They highlighted that the absence of the father in the family structure forms specific mindset about parenting. Getachew (et al., 2018) also noted a significant relationship between family structure and emotional outcomes in children living with single mothers.

Earlier studies on single parenting (Abdul et al., 2021; Alayaki et al., 2021; Dubale and Mekonen, 2022; Nwafor and Emmanuel, 2022) have focused on the impact of single parenting on children's personality development. According to Holmes (2018), more than half of children who experience early parental separation are from families where parents had split by age 11. Further research (Weinraub and Kaufman, 2019; Dugan and Barnes-Farrell, 2020) indicates that these children often exhibit extremely poor achievement levels. As Woodward (2014) puts it, a family background marked by frequent father-on-mother domestic violence may increase the likelihood of the being raised by a single-parent in adulthood.

Adult women from divided family backgrounds tend to perceive marital function as less relevant compared to women from stable marriages. According to Kulka and Weingarten (1979), women who prioritised the position of mother over that of wife were more likely to come from disrupted families. In contrast, there was no discernible difference observed among males. However, married men from disrupted families were more inclined than others to view divorce as the

best way to resolve marital issues. Supporting this conclusion, Greenberg and Nay (1982) found that college students from disrupted families exhibited more positive attitudes toward separation compared to those from stable families. However, there were no obvious variations in attitudes towards the desirability or acceptability of marriage itself.

Collectively, these findings suggest that adult (and teenage) offspring of divorce tend to hold more positive attitudes towards divorce and may exhibit reduced commitment to the institution of marriage. This pattern not only raises intriguing questions but also carries broader implications. Literature also indicates that individuals who grew up in divorced households are more likely to experience divorce themselves compared to those raised by both parents (Akaito and Musa, 2020). Recent studies (Ashley, 2021; Nwafor et al., 2021; De Wet Billings, 2022) further support this, highlighting that individuals from divorced homes often hold less favourable views towards marriage and more positive attitudes towards divorce. This negative perspective on marriage contributes to a decline in commitment.

According to Sharon (2020), it has been proven that marriage instability can be transferred from one generation to the next, as children of divorced parents have a higher propensity to forego marriage. Furthermore, Alice, Berkay, and Philippe (2019) argued that parental divorce increases the likelihood of divorce among their offspring. Children who have already faced parental conflict are twice as likely to experience divorce compared to those from intact households. Similarly, Smock and Schwartz (2020) found that, after adjusting for educational attainment, children from divorced homes are 39 percent more likely to marry than other offspring of divorce. However, nearly twice as many partnerships where one partner comes from a divorced household end in divorce compared to those where both partners come from intact homes.

Results from Iweagu et al. (2015) and Boca et al. (2020) confirm that single parenting may stem from family history and personal experiences with domestic abuse. The persistent occurrence of violence and conflicts, regardless of the nature of the family environment in which women were raised, influences their perception of the traditional ideal family, typically consisting of a father, mother, and children living together harmoniously. Some women, as a result of these experiences, choose to live independently, free from the influence of men. This aligns with the findings of Nicola et al. (2021), who reported that individuals who recall frequent arguments with their parents during childhood are more likely

to opt for single parenting to avoid potential mental health and marital issues. The divorce rate among couples where both spouses come from divorced families is approximately three times higher than among those where both spouses come from intact families. Consequently, the following section will discuss the theoretical orientation of this study.

Unfortunately, women are disproportionately affected by single parenting. Koops and Briken (2021) noted that financial difficulties are a common consequence, leading to severe and unimaginable hardships for women and their children. Many groups in Nigeria believe that women should stay at home and care for the children rather than work, exacerbating financial instability and often forcing children out of school, thereby increasing the proportion of uneducated children. Additionally, Mekonen (2022) found that children with single parents frequently suffer from poor mental health, bullying, stigmatization, and weak family ties, which negatively impact their cognitive abilities over time. Issues of loneliness and emotional distress are also prevalent. Gautam and Bhadra (2022) argued that individuals affected by single parenting may have lower expectations for future relationships. The high crime rate further impacts society. Despite these well-documented problems and the sacred nature of marriage in Nigeria, single parenting continues to rise. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the social and economic reasons for being an unmarried mother in Nigeria.

This article enhances and advances the existing body of knowledge by exploring the family as a determining factor for single parenting among unmarried mothers. It serves as a reference point for researchers intending to conduct similar studies in the future. This research is particularly valuable given the abundance of quantitative studies on the associations with single parenting, contrasted with the paucity of qualitative research examining the reasons and experiences of single parents in Nigeria. Thus, a qualitative research method was employed in this study. While several studies have investigated reasons for single parenting, including spousal death and divorce, few have explored women who choose to become single mothers by choice. This article addresses this gap by examining women who desire to raise children without getting married. Consequently, the aim of this paper is threefold: to understand the role of family background in determining single parenting; to explore how socialization influences the decision to become single mothers; and to examine the family systems and in-house experiences of females while growing up, and how these experiences translate to the adoption of the single-parent family system.

Theoretical Orientation

This study hinges on the Symbolic Interactionism Theory, pioneered by Herbert Mead (1934) in his work on 'Social Self' or 'Me'. This theory provides descriptive interpretations of meanings individuals ascribe to things, experiences, and actions as they interact with other members of society, forming the basis for symbolic interactionists' analyses of society. According to this theory, people behave based on their descriptive opinions rather than objective reality, meaning their behavioural patterns are dependent on these subjective meanings. The argument contends that since these descriptive notions and interpretations are human constructs, society is built upon these interpretations. People interpret each other's actions, and this interpretation serves as the foundation for developing social ties. These interpretations are sometimes referred to as "definitions of the situation" because the scenario is socially constructed through social co-construction.

In a similar dimension, where symbolic interactionism explains individuals and their interpretations of objects and events in their environment, single parenting is not an exception. As Blumer asserts, people act based on the meanings they attach to their surroundings; this indicates that some women prefer single parenting as a family structure. The understanding individuals have about specific events identified in the literature predisposes them to single parenting, driven by their belief that single parenting arises from social interaction with others and their society. Single mothers often conceive of single parenting based on their experiences, particularly those reflected in their family background. It may also result from experiences such as witnessing the maltreatment of their mothers by their fathers, which they internalize and act upon as they grow older.

Significantly within the family, the interactions a child has with the parent largely shape their self-concept, which Mead (1934) identified as the 'Social Self' or 'Me'. These interactions are crucial, as they have predictive capacity for the future development of the child. Traditionally, in Africa, role identities are the self-meanings attached to positions and their corresponding roles (Unoka and Vizin, 2017). For example, a mother's identity and others' reactions to her performance may become conspicuous after she exhibits singleness. In Nigeria, the enduring cultural values that supported earlier generations and, to a certain degree, defined behaviour have weakened, leading to a values crisis. The meanings given to values rely on societal expectations and are social

creations. Consequently, it becomes a national dilemma when these values no longer advance common interests as a nation. This study's major thrust is to examine how family background influences single parenting.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand how family background impacts single parenting among unmarried mothers in Nigeria. The primary objective was to gather personal experiences and perspectives of single mothers, exploring their socio-demographic characteristics, family systems, in-house experiences growing up, and the adoption of a single-parent family system. A narrative research approach was deemed appropriate as it allows participants to share their unique experiences and views in their own words, providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The key informant interviews were used to collect and explore the participants' views, beliefs, and experiences. The study was conducted over a period during the COVID-19 period in 2020 per the ethical clearance protocol approved by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the North-West University in South Africa – NWU-00675-21-A7. To work around COVID-19 restrictions, Facebook was utilised to recruit 30 participants for the interviews. This was deemed appropriate because Facebook allows for engagement and a wider reach of participants of different demographics such as age, gender, and socio-economic class variables (Yuval, 2020). An advert was placed on the Facebook group (The Community of Single Mothers), and members were allowed to voluntarily signify interest directly to the researcher through contacts provided in the recruitment advert. The recruitment exercise was aimed to identify potential participants who met the following eligibility criteria: being unmarried mothers with at least one child; residing in Nigeria and being over 18 years old.

The first 30 participants who showed interest in the interviews were selected. Informed consent was obtained and their most preferred platforms for interviews were identified, including Skype, WhatsApp and Zoom. All interviews were conducted in English. Semi-structured interview questions were based on an interview guide. Apart from the informed consent provided, participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and that, they were free at any time to withdraw from the study without any consequence. Measures were put in

place to secure the collected data through an encrypted communication channel. A personal identifier was removed to protect the identities of the participants. The interviews were conducted with sensitivity to the unique experiences and challenges of the participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings. Lochmiller (2021) noted that thematic analysis is one of the qualitative research community's most popular but frequently ill-defined method. After generating the initial codes, the patterns and similarities among the codes were identified, followed by analysing and interpreting the themes. Themes were analysed to identify patterns and relationships within the data. The interpretation was further conducted by considering the context of the data and drawing conclusions about what they revealed. Lastly, the process of thematic analysis involved describing the themes and their significance, using illustrative participants' accounts from the data to support the findings.

Findings

The following pages present the study's findings, structured around pivotal themes derived from interviews with unmarried mothers in Nigeria. We commence with an overview of participants' demographic profiles, followed by an exploration of key themes: the family system and in-house experiences of females during their upbringing, and the impact of family background, socialisation, and the choice of single parenting. These themes collectively highlight the factors influencing decision-making processes and experiences among single mothers in Nigeria.

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study participants' age distribution shows that 20% were below 25 years old, 36-25 years old comprised 30.7%, and those 46 years and above represented 13.3%. Many participants (36.0%) fell between the ages of 26 to 35 years, which is considered the prime age for marriage in Nigeria, despite their unmarried status. Ethnic representation among participants was as follows: Yoruba 45.8%, Igbo 28.9%, Hausa 21.6%, and other ethnic groups accounted for 3.8%. Table 1 provides a visual representation of these demographics. In terms of education, 4.4% of participants had no formal education. Those who completed only primary education accounted for 36.4%, while 23.8% completed

secondary education. Participants with tertiary education (university or polytechnic) constituted 35.3% of the sample.

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Below 25 Years	90	20%
	26-35 Years	162	36%
	36-45 Years	138	30.7%
	46 Years above	60	13.3%
	Total	450	100.0
Ethnic Group	Yoruba	206	45.8%
	Igbo	130	28.9%
	Hausa	97	21.6%
	Others	17	3.8%
	Total	450	100.0
Educational Qualification	None	20	4.4%
	Primary	164	36.4%
	Secondary	107	23.8%
	Tertiary	159	35.3%
	Total	450	100.0
Number of Children	One	118	26.2%
	Two	233	51.8%
	Three	66	14.7%
	Above Four	33	7.3%
	Total	450	100.0

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

In terms of the number of children, participants with one child represented 26.2% of the study population, while those with two children constituted 51.8%. Participants with three children accounted for 14.7%, and those with four or more children made up 7.3% of the sample. The prevalence of having two children among single mothers in Nigeria may be attributed to concerns about the well-being and care their children receive as single parents. This is consistent with reports from Daily Post (2021) highlighting the emotional challenges faced by children of single parents, prompting mothers to limit the number of children they must mitigate these difficulties. Collectively, these statistics not only describe the demographic composition of the study sample but also provide contextual understanding relevant to family background and single-mother parenting among unmarried mothers in Nigeria.

Family System, In-House Experiences of Females While Growing Up

Family system and in-house experiences of females while growing up play a crucial role in shaping individuals' social skills and values.

My mother was never married, though I know my father, who I stayed with briefly when I was much younger. He was never forthcoming because he had no job, so I decided to stay with her for a substantial part of my life. While staying and growing up with my mum, I understood her position on why she never got married. (Interviewee 8)

Children begin learning within their families, where they observe and internalize societal norms. For many single mothers, their immediate family serves as their primary social group during their formative years, influencing their perspectives on parenting.

Growing up with my mum has thought me a whole lot about men and their ill behaviours. I appreciate the legacy laid and passed down from my mum to me. Without the support of a man she was able to raise her children, we were all five girls, why can't I take after this legacy (Interviewee 16)

Some recount direct conversations with their mothers about their own experiences:

Of course, I grew up staying with my mother, and she often narrated how my father abandoned her for another woman. In the course of this, she decided to leave the marriage. Till she died, I and my two siblings lived without her remarrying (Ola, vegetable vendor, 2 Children)

A significant number of women who grew up as daughters of single mothers and are now unmarried with children expressed a strong dislike towards their fathers.

I can say categorically that I detest my father. He is very irresponsible and not different from the men out there on our streets. The reason being that my father abandoned us because one other lady forgot the fact that my mother was the breadwinner of the home. He sold her property afterward without her knowledge and threw us out. I can never forget this incident and If not for the sake of posterity, I never

wanted to have any child, but thank God I have two lovely children, though a single mother and I am happy with that (Interviewee 11)

This sentiment primarily stems from their childhood experiences and the socialization process they underwent while growing up.

It can be confusing to feel angry, distant, and have a deep sense of resentment towards my father. In fact, from the stories my mum usually tells me about him, and from the experiences I have also had with other men, I decided to just settle with my children all alone, I do not want to die before my time (Interviewee 12)

This dislike is often intensified by the protective stance these women take towards their mothers, reflecting a strained relationship between them and their fathers that persists from childhood into adulthood:

My father never regarded my mum, though we lived in the house, he was married to three wives because we practiced Islam. We felt so neglected that my mother struggled through pains to pay for my school fees while growing up. It was as if my mother was married but living single, because my father never cared if we existed or not, if not, my life would have been better than this. Till now, I don't think I can forgive him (Interviewee 3)

Family Background, Socialisation, and Choice of Single Parenting

Family background, socialisation, and the choice of single parenting are deeply intertwined in the narratives of unmarried mothers in Nigeria. Although single parenthood is sometimes viewed as a difficult circumstance, many end themselves in this scenario through grief, divorce, separation, or experiences learned from their families.

Does it worth it staying in the same roof with a man? My mother was a victim by two men in a row. She left the first man who was violent, she had three children; the same story for the second where she had 2 where I am the first. In order not to bury her early, she left the abusive married which was even worse than the first. Seeing all these, do you expect me to live with a man? It's not possible (Interviewer No 30)

Transitions to solo parenthood bring unanticipated issues with household organising. Some women may also choose to be single mothers through their desired pathways, therefore there is no need for

such women to be married in order to create a family. As one woman unequivocally intimated,

I cannot imagine myself going through the horrible pains my mother went through while raising us alone. It is just shit because all these men are not responsible for one bit (Interviewee No 23)

The following accounts further underscore why these women choose single parenting as their preferred family structure, influenced by their upbringing experiences where they witnessed their mothers endure hardships:

Right from when I was a teenager, I had decided I would not get married. The best would be to just have children and move on with my life. My father was more like a demon, if you see how he molested my mother under our watch, you will pity me (Interviewee No 21)

I really do not care what people say, they know me as a “no-nonsense” woman, even the so-called men. You see, it is tough, I have to care for my children alone, pay bills and survive, at the same time, I enjoy it because there is no man to nag or shout at me at home. I am indeed free, yes very free from men’s troubles (Interviewee No 13)

I disagree with how my father handled my mum. My decision on who to marry was impacted by that. I’ve decided not to wed someone who is like my father. Therefore, if I saw a resemblance to my father in any male that comes around, it made it irrelevant. I’ll recognize a characteristic and think, “Oh, this is yet another father of mine. (Interviewee No 1)

Single parenting by choice has gained prominence in contemporary society as evidenced in this study.

It’s no more men’s world but females. How I wish we women can know and understand the power we carry. I have two children and I am contented with them. I had sperms donated for me, and I have moved on. I don’t want to hear the word marriage anywhere around me. I am a free woman, free like a bird, I decide what I want with my life. I have a good business; I have my children and I am doing fine. To hell with men and marriage (Interviewee No 26)

The transition to this form of the family varies among unmarried women with children. Many participants in this study perceive marriage as less important, citing challenges such as domestic violence, abusive partners and financial constraints associated with traditional two-parent families.

I do not see marriage as something important. It did not help my mother, so, how would it help me. I am just interested in raising children, and if their father, wherever he can be supportive, fine; otherwise, I move on, and this is what I have been doing (Interviewee No 29)

Single parenting by choice, they argue, allows them to manage personal and social roles without the adversities their mothers faced. As articulated by some *participants*:

What is marriage and how important is it? Those of us who jumped into it before now, where are they now? You see, marriage is just so overrated, ones I have my children, I am settled (Interviewee No 6)

My mother was a single mother till she died, she enjoyed her life, who says I cannot be a single mother and enjoy life. Yes, I have a man friend, who is just there mainly for sex, because I need to be serviced. In addition to this, I have three children who I chose to adopt, and this is just fine by me (Interviewee No 17).

The foregoing accounts illustrate a shift in societal perceptions of parental roles, moving from crisis situations to normative life events occurring throughout the life cycle. Despite societal emphasis on marriage, single parenting is increasingly recognised and accepted as a viable family structure. The social and normative pressures that dictate parenthood timelines should be reconsidered in the context of single parenting by choice, where individuals carve out their own paths distinct from traditional familial expectations.

Discussion of Findings

That many unmarried single mothers, influenced by their mothers' experiences, often harbour negative feelings towards their fathers, particularly in adulthood, is profound. It highlights the significance of both parents' involvement in their upbringing; when fathers fail in this

role, children experience disappointment and may develop resentment. As Ardita and Rabije (2016) assert, children's initial learning and development primarily occur within the home environment, where they establish foundational skills, values, and a sense of security crucial for their growth.

In Gezova's (2015) analysis, males are traditionally seen as practical providers, while women are expected to handle the emotional care of children. Despite societal expectations, this study reinforces a view that children benefit most when both parents are actively engaged in their upbringing. The observed disconnect between unmarried single mothers and their fathers, influenced by their mothers' challenging experiences, reveal a diminished recognition of the role and importance of a spousal figure. From a symbolic interactionism theoretical perspective, understanding human behaviour requires exploring individuals' experiences and interpretations as active creators of their behaviour (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Shirley, 2011). Moreover, the study highlights how these women's decisions regarding single parenthood are deeply rooted in personal experiences, unaffected by external pressures. This resonates with Adejoh et al.'s (2019) assertion that many individuals opt for single parenting due to negative perceptions towards traditional partnerships ingrained during upbringing.

The upbringing of unmarried women with children significantly shapes their lives, echoing findings by Castetter (2020) that children of absent fathers often experience feelings of abandonment with lasting impacts. As current perspectives hold, unmarried women, influenced by their mothers' struggles and hurt caused by their fathers, perceive fathers as adversaries. This sentiment of resentment, as noted by Skurat (2020), Warner (2020), and Shumaila and Sarmad (2019) persists from childhood into adulthood. Consequently, the antipathy towards men contributes to women's inclination to avoid marriage altogether.

Women who perceived their fathers as ideal husbands tended to idealise marriage to the extent that they struggled to find similar attributes in other men. This tendency to seek partners who match their fathers' idealised traits can lead to a perpetual quest for an elusive "better" relationship. In Lagos, unmarried single mothers made varied decisions about marriage influenced by their mothers' marital experiences. Personal preference plays a significant role in some participants' choice to embrace single motherhood.

Some participants prefer to remain single mothers due to their upbringing experiences within their respective families. They reject the

idea of being under male control evident in their mothers' discouraging experiences. The understanding of human behaviour through individuals' experiences and interpretations, where people actively shape their actions and decisions is emphasized in symbolic interactionism (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Shirley, 2011). Despite societal norms, these women have made decisions based on their personal experiences, reinforcing Adejoh et al.'s (2019) observation that negative childhood exposures to relationships often lead to a preference for single parenting. This finding resonates with recent studies (Golombok & Badger, 2010; Diez et al., 2021; De la Rosa et al., 2021; Rayn, 2021) highlighting the increasing trend of single motherhood as a deliberate choice, whether through adoption or insemination, without marriage.

Symbolic interactionists Symbolic interactionists analyse society by examining the meanings individuals attribute to objects, events, and behaviours (Bijak, 2021). The interpretations people hold about particular events, often shaped by their social interactions and societal norms, predispose them towards single parenting. Single mothers often embrace single parenthood due to their personal experiences, influenced by their family backgrounds, including instances of maltreatment by fathers, which they carry forward into their own lives as they mature.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, single parenthood carries significant social stigma and prejudice. The cultural norms emphasise union formation to establish a family, with male leadership seen as natural and widely accepted. Religious doctrines and societal norms further reinforce the patriarchal structure, giving paramount importance and responsibility to marriage and marital status. Within this cultural and religious framework, having children outside of marriage is considered a serious breach of sociocultural norms and religious principles, equated with separation and divorce. Women who bear children outside of wedlock are often judged as lacking in morality and are viewed as bringing shame upon their families for engaging in premarital sex and not conforming to societal expectations of good parenting.

The study's findings indicate that unmarried women with children often develop a sense of disconnect from their fathers, influenced by witnessing their mothers' challenging experiences during their upbringing. This disconnection can manifest as a dislike towards fathers, particularly in adulthood. Moreover, the study highlights the significant

impact of a child's upbringing with their parents on their subsequent life choices, including the decision to embrace single motherhood. Additionally, women who idealize their fathers as perfect husbands may struggle to find similar attributes in other men, thus influencing their views on marriage. These findings underscore the pivotal role of socialization and family experiences in shaping the pathway to single motherhood.

This article offers valuable insights that can inform the development of programs and interventions to address the challenges faced by single mothers. It underscores the importance of raising awareness within society about the significance of marriage institutions, which have been somewhat neglected in Nigeria. There is a critical need for community reorientation, particularly among younger generations, to appreciate and uphold marriages where both parents play active roles in nurturing and supporting their children. This approach aims to strengthen family structures and potentially alleviate some of the issues associated with single parenthood.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and decisions of unmarried mothers in Nigeria, some limitations should be acknowledged. In exploring the primary objective of examining the influence of family background on single parenting among unmarried mothers in Nigeria, this study did not account for potential variations across different ethnic groups or religious contexts within Nigeria. The qualitative survey method was chosen deliberately to immerse the researcher in the lives of the participants (single mothers) and to uncover the nuanced roles of family background in shaping single parenting decisions. This approach was deemed appropriate for its ability to provide rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences of single mothers, despite limitations in generalizability inherent to qualitative research methodologies.

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