

Single Mothers Challenges in Mizo Society

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Abstract: The responsibility of nurturing children for a mother or a father alone is undoubtedly a mounting task to discharge. Single mother especially, is presumed to be facing greater degrees of obstacles because the full burden of parenting and earning falls directly on one individual along with various socio-psychological challenges in the society. This paper examined the problems faced by single mothers and recognized the potential of these women in Mizo society. It also reveals economic hardships, as the biggest challenge among the single mothers. The emotional life of the single mother was also greatly affected by their singlehood. In general, majority of the single mothers under study avoid social activities and have lesser contact with friends and neighbors after divorce/demise of a spouse. Despite the challenges faced in everyday life, most of them have been able to take care of their children and take pride in raising their kids single-handedly.

Keywords: Single Mother, Social, Economic, Emotion, Mizo, Society

Received : 30 August 2021

Revised : 25 September 2021

Accepted : 30 September 2021

Published : 30 December 2021

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ralte, Z., & Zehol, T.V. (2021). Single Mothers Challenges in Mizo Society, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 1: 2, pp. 129-144.

Introduction

A single mother is a mother who have a dependent child or dependent children and who is widowed, divorced or unmarried. It can be defined as a mother who lives with the child or children without the husband or partner. A single mother can be a widowed or a married woman separated from her husband or a divorcee or an unwed mother. In other words, single mothers referred to unwed mothers, deserted wives, or widows (Brady, 2007). One of the most startling demographic changes in recent decades has been the rapid increase in single-parent families (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Norton & Glick, 1986). The vast majority of these families are headed by women, and lone mothers with dependent children are the poorest of all demographic groups. The number of single mothers in Mizo society is high and is likely to increase further. As per 2011 Indian Census, Mizoram records the highest number of divorced or separated women in the state. Problems of single mothers

vary according to the nature of the singlehood and the support system received by them. Often deserted in life and ignored by society, such state of affairs confronts by such women need to be considered cautiously. These predominant challenging needs to be address from the grassroots level. In addition, the growing number of single mother among the Mizo society and the ultimate reasons behind the shutter too needs thorough investigation.

Study Area

Aizawl, was chosen for the present study. Aizawl being the capital of the state and keeping in view its geographical expanse, the incidence of this category of single women, as desired for the purpose of the study, would be higher than any other areas of Mizoram. Aizawl has a population of 4,00,309 persons (Census 2011). It comprises about 26.89% of the entire population of the state. The Capital city is administered by Aizawl Municipal Council (AMC). In 2011, there were 19 municipal wards under the AMC constituting about 82 local councils (LCs) of which 16 local councils were selected for the present study with the help of stratified sampling method representing approximately 20% of the total local councils. The respondents were identified from the selected 16 local councils using a purposeful and snowball sampling technique i.e.; the availability and willingness of single mothers to participate. Purposeful sampling occurs when participants are purposefully chosen to participate in a study (Morse & Richards, 2002). Snowball sampling is a method utilized when beginning with already identified candidates for the study and gaining further participants by asking referrals from those initially identified.

Methodology

A sample of 100 single mothers for different categories of singlehood was identified by adopting a purposeful and snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling methods was adopted for the selections of the sample for interview. It is generally used when there's difficulty in identifying potential subjects (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The respondents were given prior information and house visits were conducted to elicit the required information accordingly. Structured schedules were executed and various observations were also recorded mainly based on interview method.

Results and Discussion

Since the study is concerned exclusively on single mothers, the sample consists of single mothers who are widows, divorcees and unwed mothers. The criteria of the

single mothers under study include a mother without husbands or partners who have at least one dependent child below 18 years of age.

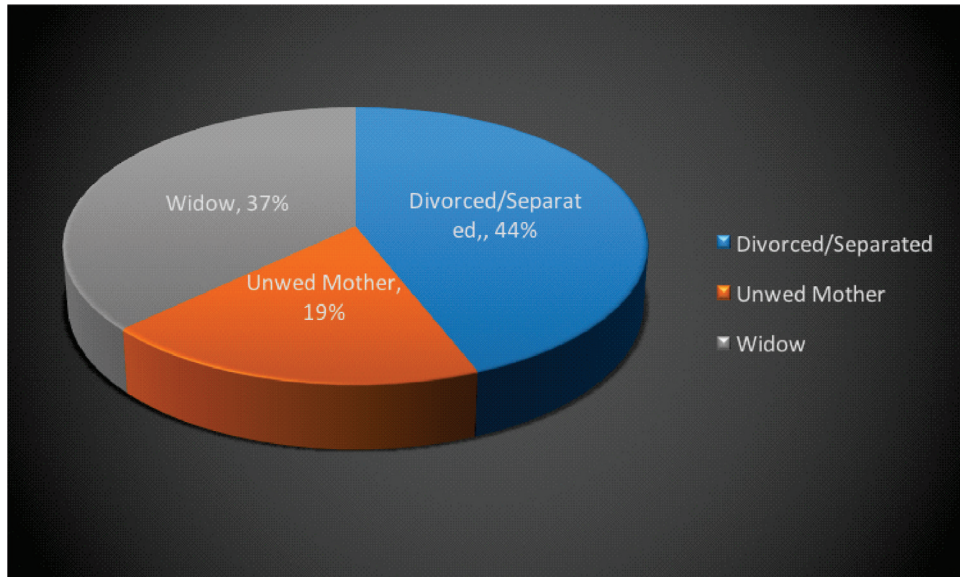


Figure 1: Marital Status of the respondents

Figure 1 highlights the distribution of marital status of single mothers from the present study. It shows that majority of the participants (44%) were divorce/separated, followed by widows (37%) and the least (19%) is found among the unwed mothers.

Table 1: Background of the Single Mother

| <i>Sl/No.</i> | <i>Responses</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Percentage (%)</i> |
|---------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1. | Age | | |
| | 20-30 | 30 | 30% |
| | 30-40 | 52 | 52% |
| | Above 40 Years | 18 | 18% |
| 2. | Qualification | | |
| | a) Less than High School | 34 | 34% |
| | b) High School | 19 | 19% |
| | c) Higher Secondary | 13 | 13% |
| | Graduate | 19 | 19% |
| | Post Graduate | 11 | 11% |
| | Professional Course | 4 | 4% |

| <i>Sl/No.</i> | Responses | <i>No</i> | <i>Percentage (%)</i> |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 3. | Occupational Status | | |
| | Govt. employed | 11 | 11% |
| | Self-employed | 51 | 51% |
| | Unemployed | 38 | 38% |
| 4 | No. of Children | | |
| | 1 | 43 | 43% |
| | 2-3 | 46 | 46% |
| | Above 4 | 11 | 11% |
| 5 | Family Characteristics | | |
| I | Family Head | | |
| | Self | 35 | 35% |
| | Father | 31 | 31% |
| | Mother | 20 | 20% |
| | Others | 14 | 14% |
| II | Total No of Household members | | |
| | Below 3 | 16 | 16% |
| | 4-6 Members | 62 | 62% |
| | 7-10 Members | 20 | 20% |
| | Above 10 | 2 | 2% |

Table 1 shows the age, educational status, occupational status, the number of children and family characteristics- like the head, the total number of household members of a single mother. The study shows that 52% of the mothers belonged to the age group of 30-40 years, 30% belonged to the age group of 20-30 years and 18% of the mothers were above 40 years. Single mothers in the present study acquired single status at the peak of their lives. This enforced them a new role to which they were required to adjust which is a matter of great concern.

Educational attainment of a woman plays an important part in determining her standard of living, socio-cultural status and esteem accorded her by the society. Educational status can, therefore, be considered as a useful index to the socio-economic position of an individual. (Barooah1993). From the above table it is found that 34% of the single mothers in the sample unit are below high school standard. About 19% are high school passed, 13% are higher secondary passed, 19% were Graduate, and 11% single mothers have completed post-graduation level. It is also found that 4% of the single mothers have finished professional courses. Educational attainment influences their outlook, attitudes, and capacity for adjustment to many demands of their circumstances. Occupation is an important indicator of socio-

economic status. The present study shows that 51% of the respondents were self-employed, 38% were unemployed and dependent on their parents, and a few (11%) of the respondents were government employed. From the above table it is found that 43% of the respondents had 1-2 children, 46% of the had 2-3 children. It is also found that 11% of the respondents have more than 4 children.

The study indicates that the majority of single mothers have living arrangements in parental houses as it offers the best possible way in terms of security, economic viability and comfort. About 31% of the households were headed by the respondent's father and 20% by the respondent's mother. Most of them are divorced and unwed single mothers. 35% of the respondent's households were headed by the respondents themselves. Most such women are widows. Often a widow inherits a house built by her husband, but a divorced woman gets almost nothing from her husband. Another 14% of the respondents continue to live with their in-laws (in case of the widow) or any other relatives. An unmarried woman in Mizo society is generally not expected to leave her parental home till she remarries. Likewise, unwed single mothers along with their child/children continue to live with their parents and does not usually feel any need to live on her own.

Economic Problems faced by Single Mothers

Economic problem is a standing situation with most of the single mothers. There is difficulty in meeting the basic needs of children such as clothing, school fees, maintaining the previous standard of living inclusive of personal expenses. Data is also collected to determine information regarding source of income, financial problems faced by single mother, aid received during emergencies/financial crises, problem faced in getting accommodation, etc.

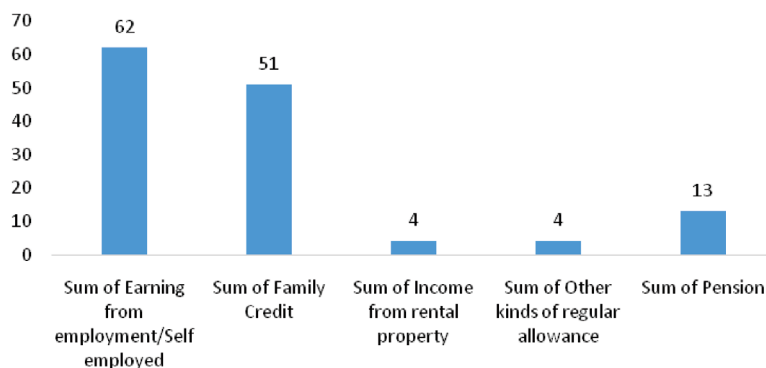


Figure 2: Respondents source of income

As it is observed from **Figure 2**, 62% of the respondent's source of income was earning from employment or self-employed. A great number 51 % of the respondent's source of income was from family credit and 13% of the respondent's depend on pension. For 4% and another 4% of the respondent's source of income was rented property and other kinds of regular allowance.

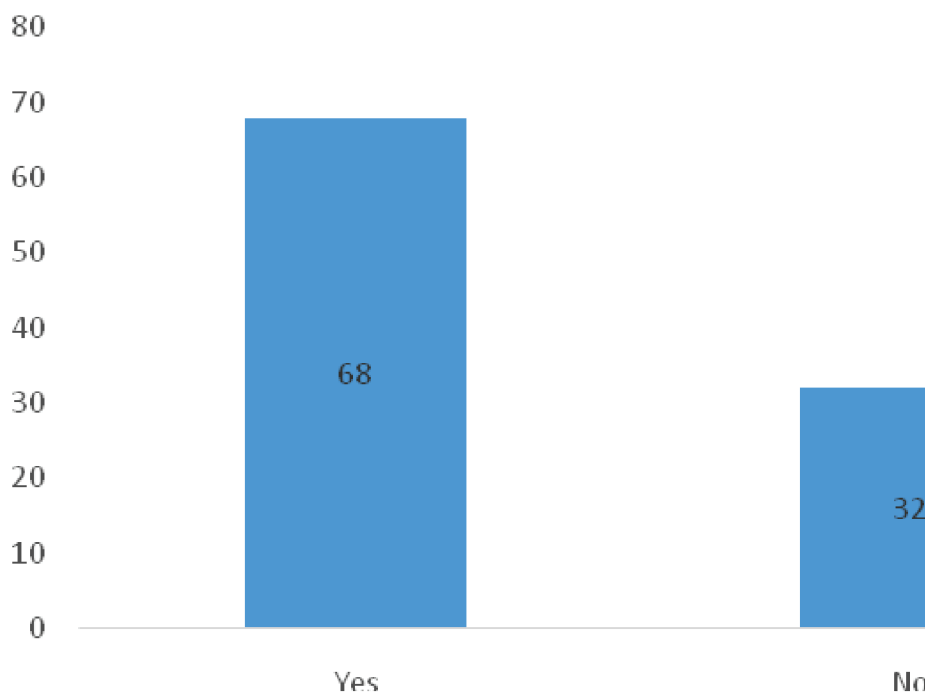


Figure 3: Financial Difficulties

Figure. 3 show that the majority i.e., 68% of the single mothers faced financial difficulties after they become single. On the other hand, a few i.e., 32% of the single mothers stated that they were living comfortably and were reasonably free from financial worries basically due to adequate financial back up for themselves and their children. In fact, they are in better condition in certain circumstances as compared to their wedlock days previously. These mothers are employed either due to their-educational background or have a good support system. There are few mothers who, at present, are able to fulfil their children's expectations. This measure from the mothers is possible owing to the lesser member that gives upper hand for economic self-resilience. However, with the ever increased in the cost of living and a limited financial resource on the other, they fear that the needs and expectations of their children may not be fulfilled within their capacity.

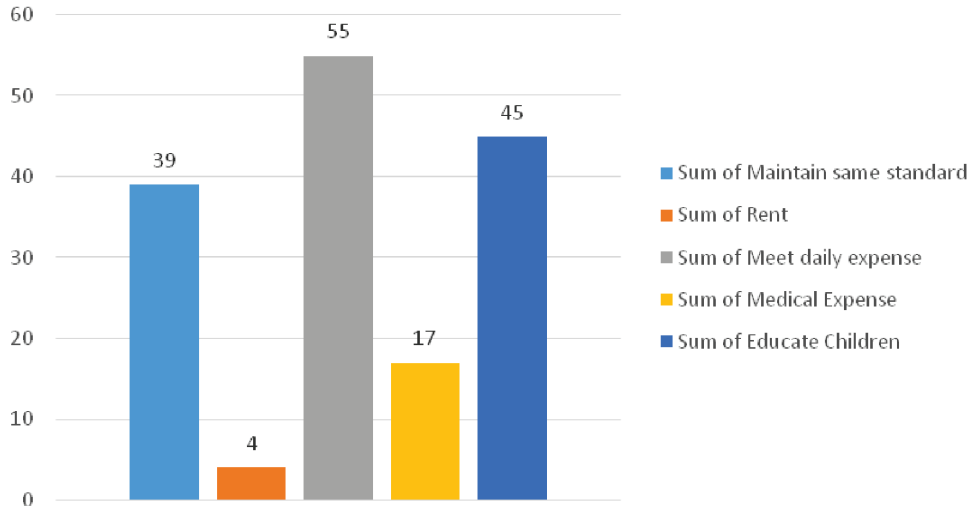


Figure 4: Financial difficulties faced as a single mother

As it is observed in **Figure 4**, 55% of the mother's faces financial problems after becoming single in order to meet the daily expense of her family and for herself. 45% of the mother's problem was to provide education to the children. It is difficult to manage for educational expenses. 39% of the respondents stated that it was difficult to maintain the same standard and they have to limit their living expense. 17% of the respondents faced difficulties in providing proper medical facilities to their children and only 4 % of the respondents have problems in paying house rent.

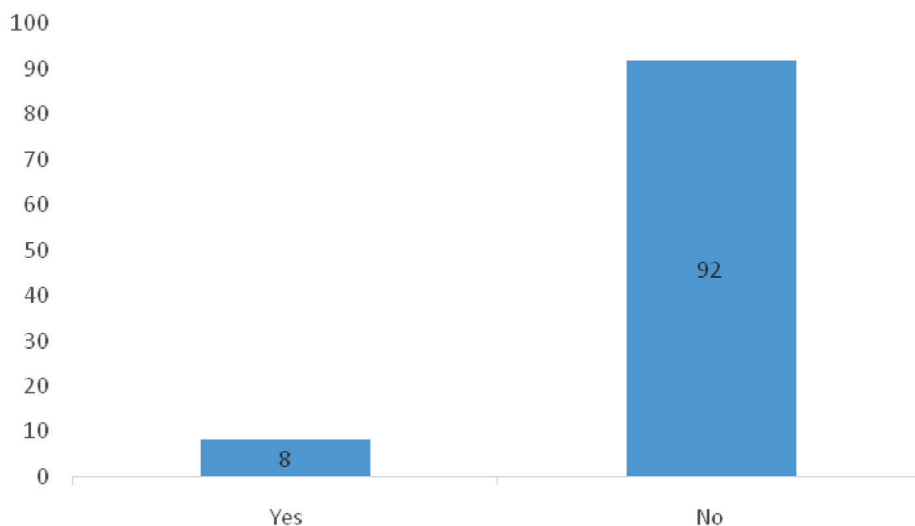


Figure 5: Rent Accommodation Problem

Figure 5 shows that 92% of the respondents do not face problems in getting accommodation, the majority of the respondents moved back to their parental house or still co-reside with the in-laws in case of widow; unwed mothers did not consider living separately from parents. Lokshin, Harris, and Popkin's (2000) studies on single mothers and their household coping strategy with poverty showed that many single mothers co-reside with relatives or other adults to cope with economic hardships. Those residing independently are more likely to face greater economic insecurity for their earnings alone has to support the household. A few of only 8% of the respondents stated they have difficulties in finding accommodation. The study reveals that the problems of getting rented accommodation are due to the non-availability of a house at a reasonable rent within the financial capacity of a single mother and she is generally not welcomed by the owner.

Figure 6 shows that 68% of the respondents received help from their parents at the time of financial crises, 11% of the respondents received help from friends/neighbours, 12% received help from the husband's relatives, 1% from Non-Governmental Organisations and 8 % of them did not received help as they did not approach anybody for help because they thought that it might hurt their self-respect, and tried to solve their problems on their own.

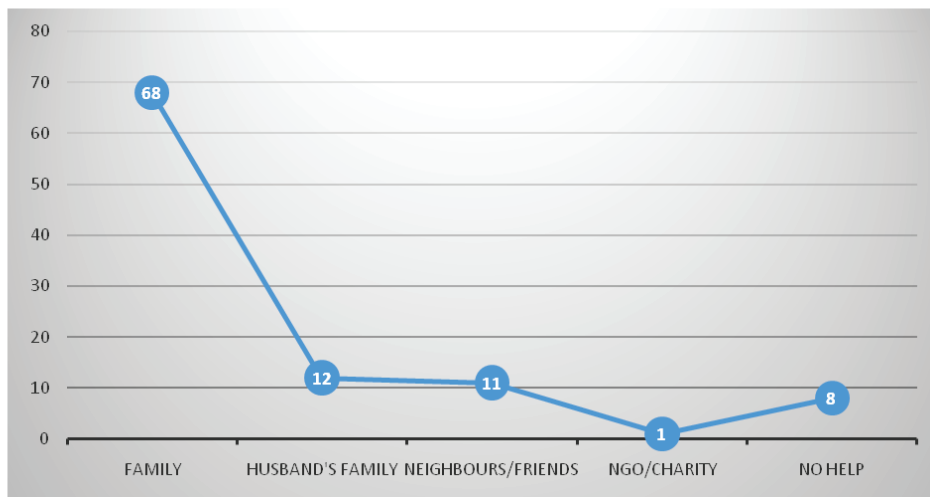


Figure 6: Help received in times of emergencies/financial crises

Emotional Problems faced by Single Mother

A single mother may experience a good deal of stress due to income insecurity and lack of social integration, lack of confidence after becoming single. It has been

observed that the emotional life of the single mothers was also greatly affected by their single status. This is especially true of women whose identity was formerly associated with that of their husbands. Data was collected to determine information regarding immediate emotional experience following singlehood, present emotional experience, problems faced in raising children as a single mother.

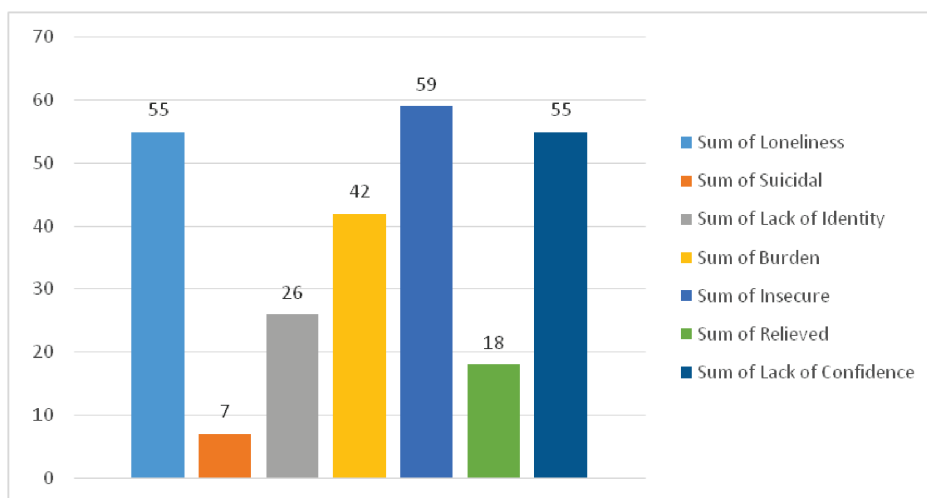


Figure 7: Immediate reaction/feeling at the time of single

On questioning the feeling, they immediately experienced on being singled, **Figure 7** shows that 55% of the respondents suffered loneliness after divorce/widowhood, 59% of the respondents felt insecure, 55% of the respondents stated that they lack confidence in dealing with the new challenges of life. 26% of the respondents felt lack of identity and thought their life was no longer meaningful. 7% of divorced respondents even felt suicidal at one point of time as they have been abandoned by their husbands. 42% of the single mothers felt big burden and at times do not want to carry on a normal life. The study revealed that most widows suffered traumatic grief because of the early death of their husband. 18% of the respondent was relieved after divorce/separation as they undergo marital tensions and were subjected to physical and emotional torture by their husbands. Some single mothers felt relieved after the divorce/separation although financially and emotionally they might have gone through a difficult period showing that there is a limit to which women can tolerate evils like domestic violence and alcoholism (Mookharjee *et al.*, 2011). The case is the same for few widows as their drunkard husband only caused them pain and trouble the family, their absence is somewhat a big relief to them. They are thus mentally prepared for the ensuing state of life with all its inherent difficulties.

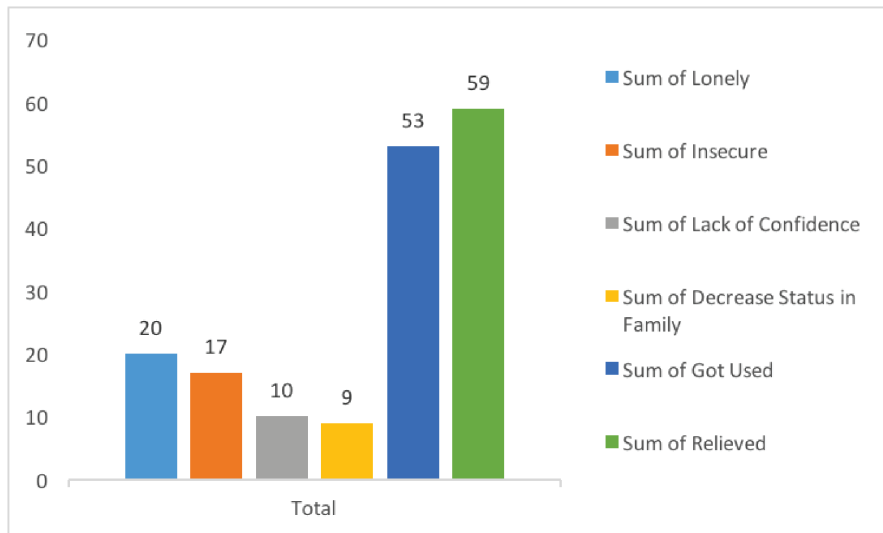


Figure 8: Present emotional experience of the respondents

Figure 8 shows the present emotional experience of single mothers. As it is observed, about 53% of the respondents stated that they got used to living alone. 59% of the respondents felt relieved. A few 9% of the respondents indicate that their family status has been decreased after being singled. Only 20% of the respondents continue to suffer loneliness even after years of being single and only 17% and 10% of the respondents continue to experience insecurities and lack of confidence. The study indicates that single mothers learn to adapt themselves and excel better with time.

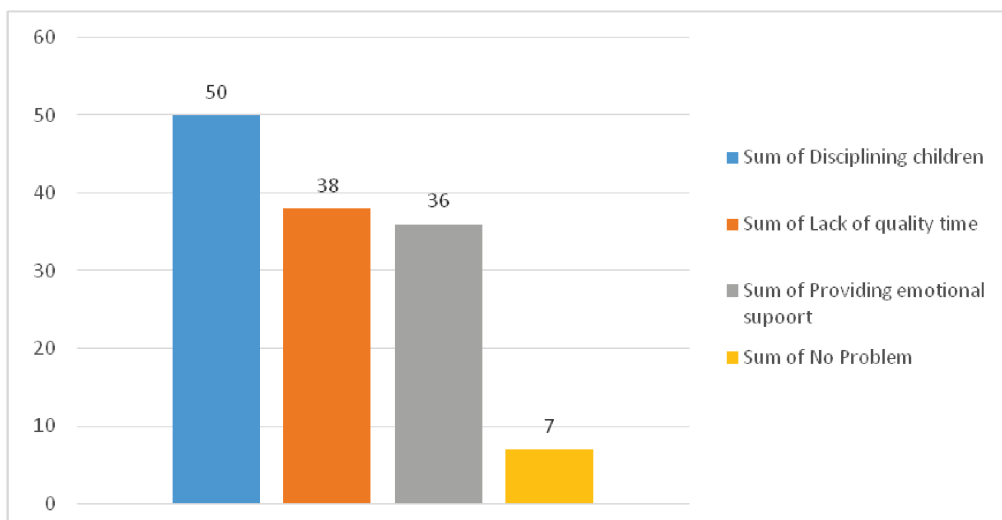


Figure 9: Problem faced in raising children as a single mother

To find out the various facets of the problem faced by single mothers in raising children single handed, **Figure 9** shows that 50 % i.e. half of the respondents most pressing problem is to maintain discipline among the children due to the absence of male counterparts. They felt that their children were out of control and were not responding to their parenting with the absence of a father. 38% of the respondents depict a lack of quality time for their children. The mothers found it difficult to coach them in their studies and provide enough time as they have to engage themselves to work in order to support them. 36 % of the respondents stated that they are unable to provide emotional support, helping them in their proper growth and development. Only 7% of the respondents stated that they have not faced any difficulties in raising children alone. This is the case of single mothers whose children are still small and hence the needs are minimal and manageable for the present and disciplining the children aren't a problem. It has been observed that respondents who have adequate financial back up are able to get over the feeling of apprehension and emotional strain to a larger extend. These mothers are employed with secure jobs or have a good familial support.

Social Problems faced by Single Mother

At times single mothers develop low self-esteem and loss of self-identity. They often dreaded social occasions as they always lead to unpleasant experiences due to the callous attitudes of others towards them. They hesitate to make new friends and suffer always from a lack of companionship. Data was collected to determine information regarding the participation of single mothers in social activities, about their changes in contact with friends/neighbours, if they have experienced sexual harassment and also the opinion on how society treat single mother.

According to **Figure 10**, only 13% of the respondents participated regularly in social activities. These mothers stated that their single status did not affect their participation in social activities and are in fact capable of compensating the absence of their husbands by doing so. 51 % of the respondents occasionally participated in social functions according to their time of convenience. 36% of the single mother under study stated that they never attended any social functions after they became single due to the feeling of low-self-esteem, lack of time and hesitation to meet people.

As it is observed from **Figure 11**, about 52% of the respondents have lesser contact with friends and neighbours after they became single. 17% of the respondents continue to maintain moderate contact with friends and neighbours. The study

observed that 31% of the respondents socialize more with friends and neighbours after they became single.

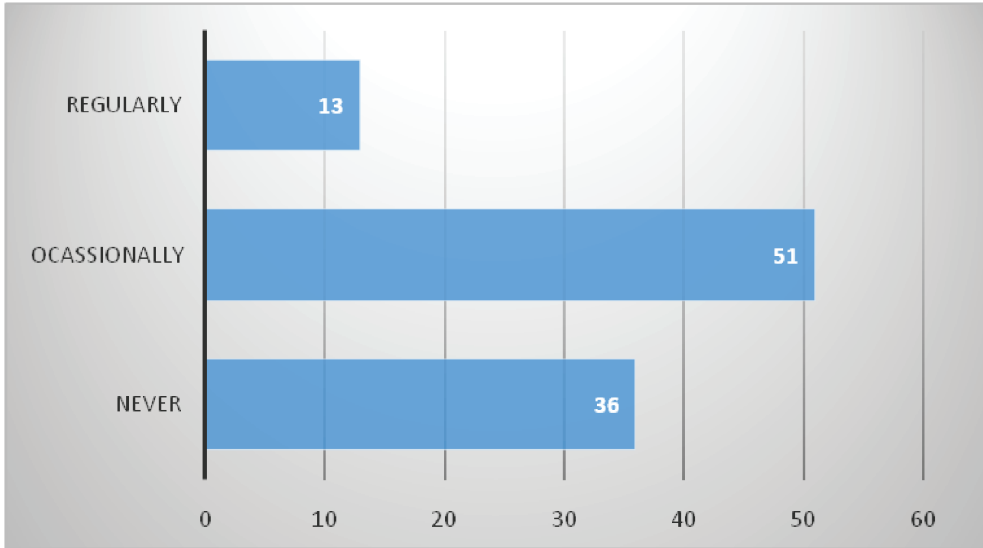


Figure 10: Participation of the respondents in social activities

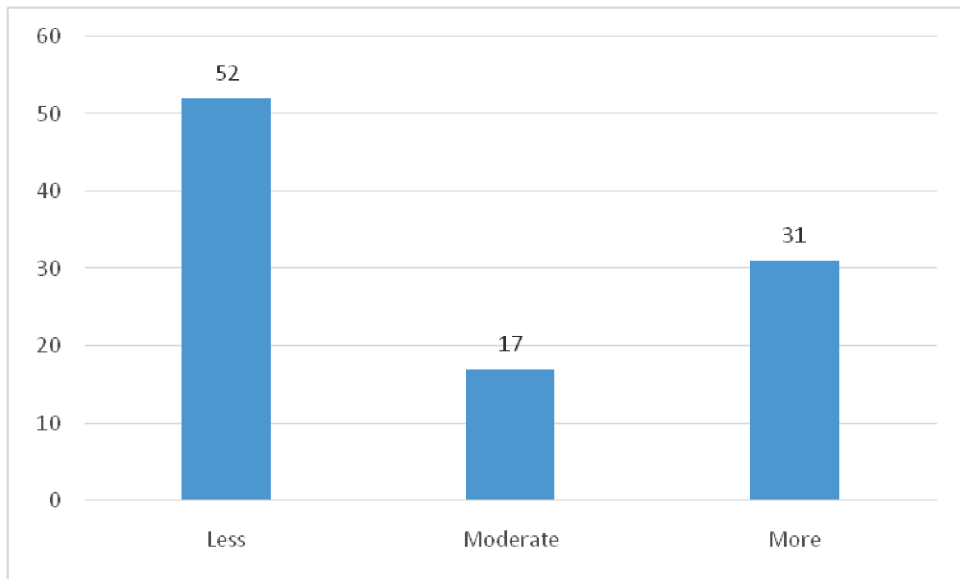


Figure 11: Respondents change in contact with friends/neighbours

The respondents were also questioned to find out if they have experienced sexual harassment. As it is observed in **Figure 12**, only 18% of the respondents

have experienced sexual harassment in their neighbourhood and workplace. It has been observed that majority of the incidents are minor which can be usually worked out and at times or taken as casual and usual by most respondents. 82% of the respondents stated that they did not face any kind of harassment because of their single status. The reason can be attributed to the ignorance of casual eve teasing which is common in Mizo society.

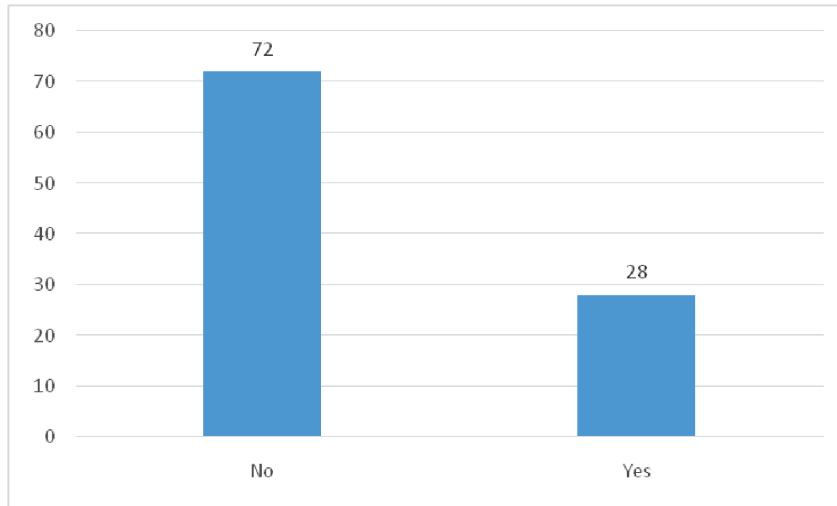


Figure 12: Experienced sexual harassment or not

Figure 13 reveals that 28 % of the respondents feel neglected by the society because of their single status. 72 % of the respondents, on the other hand, did not feel neglected by the society because of their single status. Majority of the respondents also stated that society may not neglect or treat them different but they often developed an unwelcome feeling in the society. It has been observed that young single mothers are more vulnerable to such feeling.

Coping Strategies adopted by single mothers

The coping strategies of the poor-single mother were seen from combinations of various methods of emotional and material support like friends, family members, faith spirituality, etc. Data was collected to determine the coping strategies adopted by the single mothers to overcome the hardships faced as a single mother.

Figure 14 shows that 65% of the respondents cope up with strain by prayers, majority of the single mothers seek help and rely on God at times of severe hardships, 36% of the respondents tried to maintain positive thinking in difficulties as they

felt it is the only choice they had. 28% of the respondents tried to keep themselves busy by socializing more and another 6% of the respondents said they avoid social interaction as it worsens the situation and tackle their problems alone.

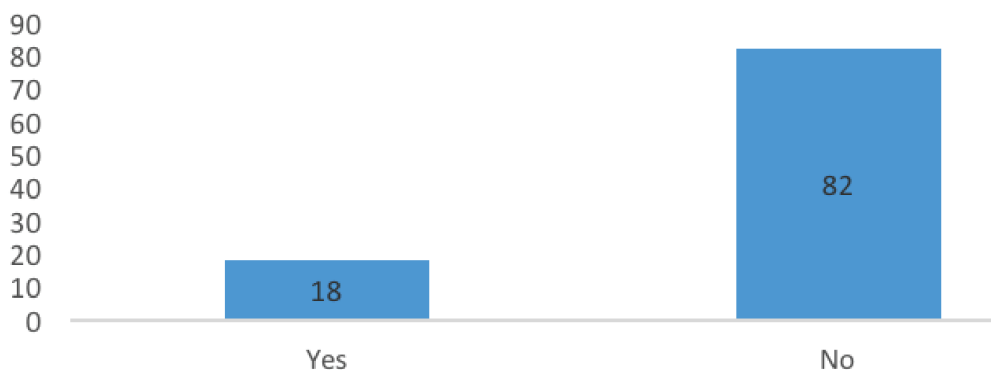


Figure 13: Respondents attitudes towards her own status in society

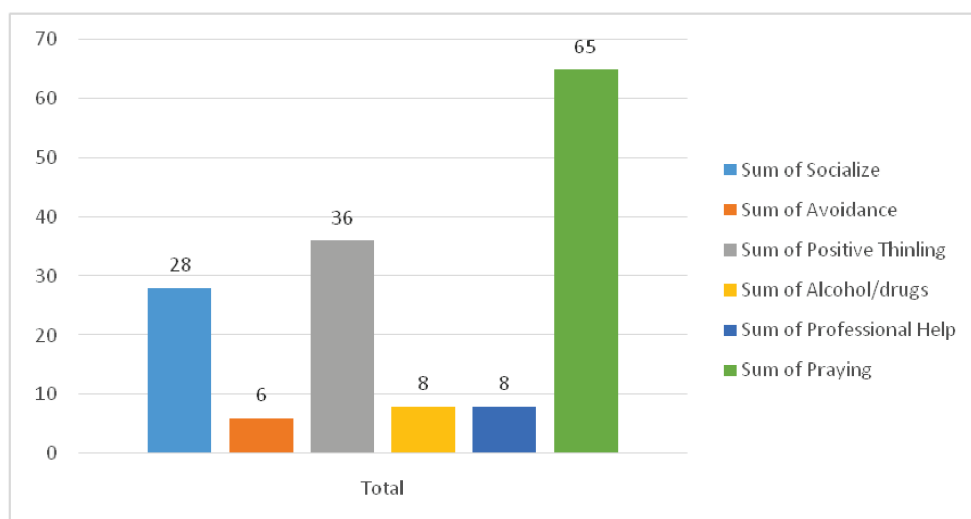


Figure 14: Coping strategies adopted to overcome difficulties

Conclusion

Single parenting requires the dual roles on the responsibility that may have been shared by their spouse and experience additional role strain as a parent. Many women became single at their youthful years that impose them a new role in which they are required to adjust. More than half of the single mothers under study were self-employed, some engaged in daily wage labourers, vegetable vendors, skilled workers, small scale_business, private teacher and few work in the professional

sector. They work under considerable stress without having job satisfaction in order to earn their livelihood. However, poverty and economic instability are not the only sources of strain in mother-only families. Besides low wages, another major barrier to employment for most mothers is child care. They are also facing difficulty in disciplining and providing enough time for their children.

The vast majority of widow, divorcees and unwed mothers tackle various types of personal and emotional problems. The study analysed that various factors compelled them to remain single. Be it widowed, divorced or unwed mother, the adjustability with the altering social circumstances is a challenging task. In Mizo society, a husband can divorce his wife anytime. In general, men face relatively fewer problems as compared to women folks. In most cases, though men are economically independent, child care poses no great problem where in their wife continues to look after the children even without significant income. The support of familial and other kin plays vital role in supporting an individual in Mizo society. The study indicates that familial relatives offer a single mother with a potential source of support economically and emotionally in her changing situation. The result also indicates that majority of the single mothers coped up their personal and emotional problems mostly in prayers and maintaining positive attitude in times of hardships. The study revealed that the biggest challenge faced by each category of single mother is mainly economic hardships. Problems of the single mother are also linked to the upbringing of children, psycho-social adjustment with her own family or society, their future and settling down in life. The participation of single mothers in social gatherings/function and church activities gradually decreases after their husband's demise. Thus, the studies conclude that on an average, every aspect of a single mother's life is problematic in nature. Despite the challenges they have faced in their everyday life, single mothers worked hard and tried their best to look after their children. Thus, single mothers among Mizo society deserve appropriate attention, need interventions and strategies to improve their economic, emotional and social outcomes in the future.

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