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Single Motherhood: Experiences of Never Married Women in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the benefits of marriage, there has been a rise in the number of single parent families, especially never married single mothers globally. This may bring about serious social problems as the consequences of children raised by single mother have been documented. Yet, little research has been conducted to find out why there is increase in the number of never married single mothers. Therefore, this study investigated and described the experiences of women who were never married but are bearing children and raising those children as single mothers. The study adopted the qualitative research method, utilizing in-depth interviews to collect data from consenting participants. The study location was Iwaya, Lagos, Nigeria, and the participants were selected using snowball sampling technique. Forty never-married single mothers were sampled and interviewed using an in-depth interview guide. The data were transcribed and content analysed. Some of the perceived reasons for the rise in the number of never married single mother identified include family background, sexual abuse, age, careless sexual behaviour and non-use of contraceptives, personal preference and perceived economic benefits. There is the need to educate women on how to prevent sexual abuse and also on proper use of contraceptive for those who may want to engage in sexual intercourse, but may not be ready to get married.

Introduction

The demographics of single parenting globally show a general increase in the number of never-married women living as single mothers (Senior, 2014). Data on the prevalence of single motherhood is not available in sub-saharan Africa. However, study by Clark and Hamplova (2013) demonstrated that about 50% of women in sub-saharan Africa are more likely to become a single mother as a result of marriage dissolution through divorce or death of a spouse. Other studies have also shown that single motherhood is common (Moyo & Kawewe, 2009; Jordal, Wijewardena *et al.*, 2013). Nigeria population by marital status shows that 50.01% of the population are married, 0.86% separated, 0.72%

divorce, 1.97% widowed and 46.44% never married (Nigeria.opendataforafrica.org/ yjdggyg/Nigeria-population-by-marital-status). However, little is known about the never married single mothers. Although there are studies on the consequences of the sexual and childbearing behaviours of unmarried African especially among adolescents (Miller & Ridge, 2001; Whiteman *et al.*, 2001), the reasons behind why women, who are not formally married but are bearing child or had given birth to a child or children are largely not studied.

The concept of single motherhood in Nigeria may not be new. However, little is known about single mothers, who were never married. This study explored the individual experiences of single mothers with specific focus on the reasons associated with becoming a single never married mother. A single parent (also known as lone parent, solo parent and sole parent) is a parent who cares for one or more children without the physical, psychological and sometimes financial assistance of the other parent (Whitman, Borkowski & Keogh, 2001); a single parent is a parent who cares for one or more children without the assistance of the other parent in the home (Miller and Ridge, 2001).

Previous studies have examined single parenthood in the context of divorce, adoption, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood; while for others, it is as a result of unforeseeable occurrence such as death, child abuse, child neglect, or abandonment by biological parents (Miller, Vandome & McBrewster, 2010). For some, they have examined the problems of single parenting families focusing on economic difficulties and poverty (Oyefara, 2011) and economic disadvantage (Olaleye & Oladeji, 2010; Obono, 1998). Whitehead (1993) indicates that the causes of single parenthood may include divorce, the death of spouse, having a child out of wed-lock, adoption and early pregnancy. Studies have also linked the reasons for single parenthood to family breakdown due to divorce/separation or death of a spouse and other factors like non-marital childbearing, migration and personal choice (Moyo & Kawewe, 2009; Dintwat, 2010; Clark and Hamplova, 2013).

According to Bergman (2007), single parent families are at a higher risk of poverty than couple families, and on average single mothers have poorer health than coupled mothers. Also, single parenting is strongly associated with an increased risk of a number of negative social, behavioural and emotional outcomes for children.

The institution of marriage is central in many communities in the African context. Extant studies have demonstrated that for women in particular, marriage is a crucial means of securing socio-economic status; having access to land, capital and housing (Potash, 1989; Hakansson, 1994). Beyond economic benefits, marriage is also seen by many African women as a source of community respect and social identity (Holtedahl, 1992; Yana, 1995) and in most cases single women are under pressure to get married (Hakansson, 1985). In this regard, investigating and describing the reasons why some women may opt to childbearing without going through a formal marriage despite the benefits attached to being married is important and urgent considering the negative consequences of single motherhood on the child, the family and the

society at large as documented by previous studies. It is therefore necessary to identify and understand the reasons behind why never married women gave birth and live as single mothers. This will help to prevent such phenomenon and the subsequent social problems that may arise from such house hood.

Theory

The study is anchored on symbolic interactionism because understanding human behaviour requires considering the experiences and interpretations of the actors. The perspective focuses on the individual “with a self”, and on the interaction between a person’s internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behaviour. Individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own conduct who interpret, evaluate, define and map out their own action, rather than as passive beings, who are impinged upon by outside forces (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Shirley, 2011). Mead’s view sees the “self” as an acting organism. That the self is far more than an “internalization of components of social structure and culture.” Rather, it is a social process of self-interaction in which the human actor indicates to himself matters that confront him in the situation in which he acts, and organizes his action through his interpretation of such matters. According to Mead, the actor engages in this social interaction with himself by taking the roles of others, addressing himself through these roles and responding to these approaches (Shirley 2011).

The self is active and creative, and does not recognize such ingredients as social, cultural, or psychological variables that “determine” the actions of the self. Mead stresses people’s ability, through the mechanism of self-interaction, to form and guide their own conduct. His position is that individuals act on their own environment, and in so doing they create the objects. Applying this to the status of never-married single mothers, the decision to be in that position seems to have been deliberately taken in some situation having experienced and understood what it means and takes to be married. This decision could be connected to her experiences while growing up with her own parents, such as domestic violence. Such decision is not in line with societal dictates that every woman is expected to be married and live together with her husband as a family, but from the interpretation of actions within her environment.

Method

The phenomenological research design was used to explore the perceived reasons behind single motherhood among consenting never married women but bearing children in Lagos. The basic principle of phenomenology is that, because everyone experiences life in a unique way, reality is subjective and can be understood from the perspective of the individual. The phenomenological method has value in exploring the meaning of any event that affects human beings (Oiler, 1982; Omery, 1983).

The study used a qualitative approach, using in-depth interview guide to collect data from 40 never married women who consented to participate in the face-to-face interviews. The never married women are defined as women who

have never been married and have given birth to a child or children and are raising and taking care of such children with little or no help or assistance from significant others.

The study population for this study are never married single mothers in Iwaya community, Lagos. A non-probability sampling technique – Snowball technique – was adopted for selecting samples from the population because the study population is hidden, and could be difficult to access. As a referral sampling technique, snowballing involves a process in which existing subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. A total of forty participants consented to be interviewed out of forty-five that were identified. The selection criteria to participate were that each of the participants must have never been married, living alone with a child or children, and should have consented and willing to be interviewed.

The interviews were conducted by the third author in English Language, 'Pidgin English' and Yoruba Language. An in-depth interview guide was used to collect the data on a one-on-one basis. The questions were open ended and took the form of conversation between the participants and the interviewer and some of the questions asked included: 'tell me about your family while growing up as a child,' "tell me about your experience as it relate to your age and becoming a single never married mother," "tell me what you know about contraceptive and you becoming a single never married mother," among others. The participants were asked questions directly and their responses were recorded immediately. The process of analysis began by doing open coding and microanalysis. This process entailed a deep routine interaction with the generated data on a daily basis throughout research phases. We employed an iterative analysis approach in finalizing the code list to reflect a nuanced focus on the study themes. On the other hand, direct quotation of responses (that indicate participants voices), which entails verbatim reporting of opinions that support important findings in the data were done.

Results

Family background, domestic violence and single motherhood

Polygamy and single motherhood

From the interview, over two-third (28) of the participants grew up in polygamous homes, where some experienced marital crises, conflict and instability of their parents. It could be said that this type of family system engenders single motherhood as the experience of their parents could have taught them that it is better to remain single than to be married. Hence, some of them move out of their parents' home to establish theirs in order to enjoy peace and stability. During the interview with an HND graduate who works in a local government in Lagos, she said:

I grew up in a family of 22. My father had six wives and fifteen children, a very large family, many troubles, fighting, among the wives, and among the children. There is always something new to fight about every day. As I grew up I lost interest in marriage

due to this stress I face every day and so have decided to remain on my own. My mother died from the injury she sustained when she fought with one of my father's wives. (34 years)

A participant expressed her experience:

My mother and father were living peacefully until my father took in another wife, who became my step mother. My mother left us with my father to be with another man. My step mother maltreated me and my younger ones so much. When I got pregnant for the father of my children, we lived together at some point until he started seeing another woman. I remembered what I went through with my step mother, so, I left with my children which made me a single parent till date. (32 years)

With this illustration, the various inhumane treatments previously experienced by the participants constituted a reason for opting to become a single mother among the participants.

Monogamy, domestic violence and single motherhood

The data revealed that less than half (12) of the participants grew up with both parents in a monogamous family. One of the participants narrated her experience of domestic violence while growing up:

Though my siblings and I grew up with our parents, they fought always over things. Even when my mother seemed quiet over a matter my father still beat her almost every day over any little argument. He sometimes transferred this aggression to us the children. The experience wasn't palatable at all, so while growing up I prayed I get a good man to marry. When I got pregnant for the father of my kids and I told him, he beat me blue black. Then I concluded that men are all the same. I had to leave and now I am left with the responsibilities alone. (46 years)

Recalling a bitter experience, a participant stated that:

Because I cannot recover from the shock I had when my father poured very hot water on my mother when I was 24, I cannot live under the same roof with the man I call the father of my children. (29 years)

With this experience, some women have the phobia for marriage or staying with men because they feel men could torture or torment them, so they decided to remain as never married mothers and to raise their children themselves as single mothers.

Age, unwanted pregnancy, contraceptive single motherhood

Age and single motherhood

Describing the relationship between age and single motherhood can be seen at the level of being under aged or over aged for conception. For those who were under age, some of them became pregnant because they were raped and some because they did not understand how to use contraceptive. For some of the participants, they decided to get pregnant to escape the 'trap of menopause' because when a woman is past the age of conception, she may not conceive from the biological point of view.

Under age, rape and single motherhood

The question of under-age and single motherhood was addressed by some of the participants with respect to their experiences. A participant stated how she was raped and became a single mother:

I was raped as a house help in Lagos when I came from Lokoja to Lagos few years ago in order to help my parents in the village. At that time, I was 15 years old, and I could not recognise these guys, and all through my life time, I had to carry on with the responsibility of taking care of this girl you are seeing. (23 years)

A participant with the experience of sexual assault stated how she became a single mother:

I grew up with my aunty when I lost my parent to armed robbers in our home when I was 12years old. Her husband started by touching my organs each time I wear a long face when my aunty is not around. He used to threaten me and say, "I will send you to my parents." The molestation continued till he had unprotected sex with me for the first time and I got pregnant at 14years. When he discovered I was pregnant he travelled. My sister aborted the pregnancy and begged me seriously, so I ran out of their house. I later met another man who was 10years older than me who promised me heaven and earth. He got me pregnant and absconded. If I was a bit older I wouldn't have been so gullible to believe the man. I have gone through hell with my uncle. (24years)

As shown in the responses, some participants became single mothers because they were not mature age-wise and could not prevent being raped and deceived by men.

Over age and single motherhood

Unlike being under aged, when a woman is over-aged and not married, societal pressure whether expressed or not could force her to either get married or be impregnated so as to have her own child. It should be noted that as a woman advances in age, her fertility level reduces. The anxiety from this could also

drive a woman into single motherhood. In a bid to reduce this implication, they could 'sell' themselves cheaply to any man all in the name of having a child without marriage. Against this backdrop, being over-age can prompt a woman into single motherhood.

In addition, being a single mother as a result of being over aged could cause depression because of the loneliness and burden of taking care of the child or children, causing them to take irrational decisions. It was discovered that most over aged women preferred having a child to getting married. A participant stated:

I was engrossed with my profession and qualifications that I had no time for marriage. When I realised, it was quite late. At 43, I no longer considered marriage, but just to have a child. Thank goodness, it was achieved, but this will be my greatest regret in life. (52years)

A participant who was anxious about getting married because of her age expressed her experience:

I was 41 when I decided to adopt a baby girl from a motherless home. At 45 years a man showed up who asked for my hand in marriage, and I accepted. I got pregnant for him. He was diagnosed of cancer of the liver. The marriage didn't hold. I gave birth to a set of triplet as you can see them playing, I had to resign from work, and start up a business which will give me time to take care of their father and the kids as well. The whole responsibilities are on me. I am 47 years now. I pray he gets better so we can get married and share these responsibilities. (47 years)

Unplanned pregnancy and single motherhood

Some participants became single mothers because of unplanned pregnancy. Unplanned pregnancy is the type of pregnancy not planned for by both sexual partners. It was also said that it is the type of pregnancy rejected by either of the parties in a sexual relationship due to the failure to use contraceptives or miscalculation of ovulation cycle or irregular menstrual cycle.

Miscalculation of ovulation cycle, irregular menstrual cycle and single motherhood

Findings indicate that irregular menstrual cycle or hormonal imbalance was one of the things making it difficult for some participants to keep track of their ovulation period. As a result, they conceived, and the rejection of the pregnancy by the men and their families made them single mothers.

Unplanned pregnancy is caused when the female, specifically, does not keep track of her ovulatory cycle. (23 years)

A participant briefly stated her experience of irregular menstrual cycle:

Due to my irregular menstrual cycle or hormonal imbalance, it was difficult for me to keep track of my ovulation period, which made me get pregnant, and the rejection of the pregnancy by the man and his family made me a single parent. (22 years)

Contraceptive and single motherhood

Some participants were of the view that their failure or inability to make use of contraceptives led to their unplanned pregnancies. They agreed that their inability to make use of contraceptives like condoms during sex or pills before or after sex led them into becoming pregnant.

If these guys who raped me had used condoms, I would not have gotten pregnant. Now I am a single mother. (17years)

Another participant stated that:

We had unprotected sex. I was meant to use contraceptive, a drug which I failed to use within 72hours of the sexual intercourse. I got pregnant at 22 years of age, and I am left to cater for the child alone since the father is still a student. I dropped out of school to cater for this child. (25 years)

A participant expressed her inner feelings about sex and contraceptive:

I don't enjoy sex using condom, either the male or female one I don't enjoy it at all. I used my "free period" to have sex and it worked for me. But when I'm not too sure if I'm safe or not, I use contraceptive drugs, but it failed me and I got pregnant. This led me to cater for my boy alone without the help of the father who told me categorically he was not ready to be a father. (29 years)

The data demonstrate that inability to use contraceptive due to one reason or the other can lead to unplanned pregnancy and this may lead them into single parenting as some of the pregnancies were denied and rejected outright by the sexual partners.

Personal preference/decision, perceived economic benefits and single motherhood

Preference and single parenthood

The data show that some women indeed preferred not to be married and be single mothers. The main reason advanced was that they could not tolerate the pains and agony other women go through when under men, especially the ones who molest and abuse their wives. Some participants feel that they preferred single parenting because they do not want to be controlled by men, or stand any emotional problem. A participant recalled her experience:

I grew up in a family where my father tortured my mother so badly, even under our eyes as children. This experience has made me believe that all men are the same. As with this, I just

have three children for a man, but I cannot stay in the same house he lives. (55years)

It was also gathered that preference for single parenthood can also be as a result of unforeseen circumstances as a mother of two puts it:

I became pregnant for a man, who while we were planning to get married had an accident that affected his spinal cord. He couldn't work again, and this is about five years now. I was able to give birth to his children, because fortunately, they were twins. I have decided to be a single mother because if I get married, I will hurt the father of my children; so at that point, I decided to remain single. I have my children, and I am settled. (36 years)

As revealed from the data, some participants preferred not to stay with a man because of their experiences when they were growing up and also due to the fact that they were abused and molested by men at some points in their lives.

Perceived economic benefits and single motherhood

According to some of the participants, economic benefit is a reward which is always in tangible form like money and other material gains. They also believed that economic benefits encourage women to be single parents. We explain this assertion from the view that humans are rational beings who want private gains from their engagements and interactions with other members of the society. From the findings, some women decided to stay with their children alone to get money and material gains from the fathers of their children. Although only a few participants believe in this ideology, the participants who advocated for this kind of act said:

Men are not worth suffering with. I have three children from three different men who provide financial assistance to me and their various children. As a single mother, it pays me, because I have access to this money collected for my children and I can use it as I like. Well, it is stigmatising, but I don't care what people say. I am happy as I am. (38years)

A participant who had children for a man without being married to him has this to say:

My intention was to have children for a man who is so rich and I don't have to be married to him. All I wanted was for him to take care of my children and pump more money to my account. I have achieved this, and I am presently living alone with my children and their father has been a responsible man. I don't care what anyone feels about my status, because I'm very happy. (32years)

Similarly, another participant narrated her experience with regret:

The father of my children was very rich as at the time I met him, so his wealth attracted me to him. I got pregnant for him, just to tie him down. I had a baby boy for him and he was very happy. Little did I know that he has a family abroad, he relocated back to his family in London, he called me from there that he won't be returning back to Nigeria, he sent money few times and finally stopped sending us money. I had to carry my cross alone. My boy is 15years now; I really regret this lifestyle. (45years)

Discussion

This study explored the reasons some women were not married but have given birth to children and raising those children on their own. The findings demonstrate that family background and experience of domestic violence in the family could be a reason fuelling single motherhood among the participants. The findings show that irrespective of whether a woman grew up in a polygamous or monogamous setting, some of them experience conflicts and violence, and this has affected their perception of conventional ideal family of father, mother and children living together and caring for one another. Based on their experiences, some have opted to live alone without being under the control of any man. This is in line with the assertion of Amato & Keith (2000) that adults who are able to recall a high level of conflict between parents while growing up tend to opt for single parenting, in order to avoid a large number of psychological and marital problems in their own lives.

Age is a factor in determining whether a woman will decide to become a single mother or not. The findings show that age could be examined from two dimensions: under age and over age. Some participants were victims of rape because there are under aged and the circumstances they find themselves, while for some they got pregnant while they were dating their boyfriends, who subsequently rejected the pregnancy. This situation lead some of the women taking care of the child alone and some of them with little help from some significant others. Under aged pregnancy could be as a result of inexperience on the part of the woman explained in terms of miscalculation of menstrual cycle and none use or improper use of contraceptive, or even rape. The study also revealed that age, to a large extent, determines single parenthood. Many never-married women who are single mothers were victims of rape in their teenage years. Such abuse may have involved many individuals, which makes it difficult for her to identify the true father. Hence, she is left with the responsibility of taking care of the child alone.

The findings show that being over aged could encourage a woman opting to be a single mother. Some, who could not get married on time, could decide to just meet a man and get pregnant to have a child without following the formal rites and rituals of getting married. Some of the women deliberately opted for single motherhood, when they realised that they are over-aged, because some were engrossed with their career advancement with little attention to building marital union. This is tandem to the argument of Part,

Moreau, Donati, Gissler, Fronteira & Karrol (2013) that being a never-married single mother is a function of circumstances that surround an individual, which is either unintentional or deliberate. The finding of the study is supported by the finding of Palamueni (2010) that Increase in age at marriage has been associated with increased risk of single motherhood.

Unplanned pregnancy was identified as a factor in single motherhood. The study identified miscalculation of menstrual cycle and failure to use contraceptive or not properly using contraceptive, and rape as some of the factors that bring about unplanned pregnancies. In most cases, such pregnancies are rejected by the men, where the person is known and the woman is left to care for such a child or children alone.

Individual preference as a choice is one factor that influences some of the participants in deciding to become a single mother. Some of the participants will rather prefer to remain as a single mother because of their experiences while growing up in their respective families. Some do not want to be under the control of any man because their mothers' experiences were not encouraging for them to follow. This is in line with the argument of symbolic interactionism that understanding human behaviour requires examining the experiences and the interpretation of the actors. Individuals are seen as active constructors of their own conduct who interpret, evaluate, define and map out their own action (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, Shirley, 2011). In this situation of individual preference, no matter what the society dictates, some of the women had decided on what they want based on their experiences, and so external forces could not imping on their decision to remain never married but have children. This finding corroborates Jerry's (2006) view that the negative perspective of relationships that have been instilled due to the exposure of their childhood made many youths prefer single parenting. The findings are also in line with Mannis (1999); Golombok & Badger (2010) findings that single motherhood is also emerging as a result of individual choice where women choose to adopt or have children without marrying through insemination.

Perceived economic benefits by some participants is another factor that some women may opt to remain never married but have children. Some of the women acknowledged economic gains from their present living arrangement, where they collect some money and materials items for the upkeep of the child or children and in the process benefits from such resources.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study showed that the reasons behind a woman becoming a never-married single mother could be voluntary and involuntary. The voluntary reasons are those reasons that were deliberately taken and acted upon by the women themselves and these are to avoid the experiences of their own mothers, while growing up as children with parents; the economic benefits of the monthly stipends from father of the children, which in some situation the women use it for other purposes other than for the child or children. Being over aged and attempt to escape menopause led some women to taking deliberate decisions to

have children without being married. The involuntary factors include being under age and victim of rape and family background. The study recommends that young women should be educated on how to prevent rape and sexual assault through deliberate policies and programmes. Those who had experienced domestic violence either directly or indirectly should be identified and appropriate intervention carried out on them by social workers and other caring profession.

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