

## A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SINGLE PARENTING IN A TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Sonam Bhatt,**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Sociology,  
Government Degree College, Rudraprayag, Uttarakhand

### ABSTRACT

Single parenting is becoming common in India what is not common is that the issue is not discussed due to social stigmas attached to it. The Corona virus pandemic has had a great impact on the families headed by single parents. A report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation that 1.38 billion children are out of school or child care. Evidences show that during the period of school closures violence and vulnerability has increased leading to health emergencies. Economic crises and parenting without a helping hand added stress to already vulnerable section of society. This paper examines the struggles and the coping practices adopted by the single parents (father/mother) in the time of infection, quarantine and isolation. The data was collected through primary sources through telephonic interview of 5 single parents using an interview schedule and secondary sources such as journals, research papers, articles, news papers and online interviews. It was found that due to closure of schools, crèche and care givers along with working from home has resulted into a stressful environment for both parent and children and a chronic guilt of losing the partner.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has finished the gap between a work place and home. Schools and offices have been completely shut down making people live together all through the day with restrictions on leaving home. Stress and compromised parenting often place children at risk of abuse and neglect. However, because of the global corona virus disease, families are experiencing a new range of stressors that threaten their health, safety and economic well being. Parental stress plays an eminent role in child maltreatment potential. Parent child relationship may turn to cognitive, emotional and physical fatigue in case of continuous exposure to stressor. Increase in parental stress may likely engage in harsh parenting creating a room for child maltreatment. However, certain factors as controlling stressful events or support from family members act as a

buffer in dissolving distress and the risk of child maltreatment. Research suggests that stress due to economic hardship is more for parents with low income. Indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected families who have not even been directly exposed to the virus. Single parents have already been doing twice the work but after the announcement of lockdown their key support system collapsed due to the restrictions put on schools, day care and community. The pandemic have taught the single parents a new perspective of parenting while enduring psychological health struggles with grit.

The socio-economic outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic for single parents are unknown. Based on early research findings on single parents, a few risk factors were identified: school closures were particularly difficult for single parents and also for

their children, income loss may be more challenging to compensate without a second earner, and isolating from the community effected single parents adversely.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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**Ravichandran N. (2020)** in her article titled “How Single Parents Are Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic” has discussed on the loneliness single parents felt during the pandemic and has also discussed about the single parents who were tested positive and the challenges they faced in taking care of their child/children at the time of lockdown. The author has given a brief insight of 10 single parents, 08 of whom were females and 02 were male. A telephonic interview was conducted with the respondents. The respondents were from different professional background and regions. The author concluded that loneliness has hit single parents. The situation of single parents is same as two-parent families except single parents don’t have anyone to share the work load.

**Nieuwenhuis R. (2020)** in his study “The situation of single parents in the EU” describes patterns in the condition of single parents in the EU and has also included evidence from Iceland and Norway. The study analysed the resources, employment, and social policy regarding single parents and has also sent recommendations to improve their situation, with focus on Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences. The study found that the situation of single parents has improved and they are less likely to be among the low income and low education group. It was also found that child support policies in the EU have helped in improving the overall situation of single parents.

**Doon J. (2020)** conducted a study titled “Stress and Parenting during the Global COVID-19 Pandemic” where the objective of the author was to find whether stress and compromised parenting affect the upbringing of the child. This study inspected the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to parental perceived stress and child abuse potential. There were 183 participants with children under 18

years of age. The study was conducted in the USA. The data was analysed using tests of group differences and hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The study concluded that COVID-19 related disruptions, anxiety and depressive symptoms are related to higher perceived stress and child abuse potential.

**Brown S. (2020)** in her study titled “Stress and parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic” has analysed the parent-child relationship at the time of pandemic. The association between parents’ stress and child’s malnutrition was analysed. The respondents were called from child- and family-serving agencies and educational settings. The study area was Rocky Mountain region, United States. Respondents were also contacted by phone or email. The study was conducted on Parents above 18 years or older having a child less than 18 years of age. They were provided an online survey link that was administered via Qualtrics. The study found that the global COVID-19 pandemic is a stressor that is not an internal part of the family system but it is perceived as a significant stressor for many parents and children.

**Gracia S. (2021)** in the study named “The journey of single moms amidst COVID 19 pandemic” discussed the experiences, challenges and coping mechanisms of single moms during the covid-19 pandemic. The study was conducted using interpretative Phenomenology analysis (IPA). The sample size was 10. The study found out that in terms of challenges the single mothers struggle financial hardship and look for emotional support. Since the study was conducted on respondents from Philippines, it was found that despite strong cultural boundations the single parents are non-restrictive in teaching their children.

## AIM/OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

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The objectives of the present study are to evaluate the coping strategies single parents adopted to manage work and home during Covid-19 pandemic. Further the present research study focus on the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the changes parents perceived in the parenting process during the pandemic.
2. To study the economic hardship single parents went through during the lock down.
3. To study the child care challenges single parents faced due to the closure of schools and day care institutes.

## METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The research represents the socio-economic challenges faced by the single parents during the time of lockdown in Covid19 pandemic. The single parents involved in the study are working in government or private sector. Parents aged above 18 were involved in the study with children below 10

years of age. A descriptive analysis is presented based on the interviews of the samples. The sample was selected randomly through snow balling technique. Single parents were asked questions on the difficulty they faced during the lock down. It was tried to analyse whether work from home helped them to spend more time to with the child/children. Observations were made to know how far the economic factor affected their daily routine and their expenses. Views of the sample were taken on online study of their kids.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

It included parents' age, gender, educational status, relationship status, monthly income, financial assistant and number of adults and children in the household. Following are the variables recorded for analyses:

### Age of Respondents

S.No	Parent's age	Numbers
	18-23	0
2	24-29	1
3	30-35	2
4	36-41	2
Total		5

### Gender

S.No	Gender	Numbers
	Male	0
	Female	5
Total		5

### Educational status

S. No	Education	Numbers
1	Graduation	1
2	Post Graduation	2
3	Above Post Graduation	2
Total		5

### Relationship status

S. No	Relationship status	Numbers
1	Living with spouse	0
2	Not living with spouse	4
3	Living with family members	1
4	Not living with family members	0
Total		5

#### Monthly Earning

S. No	Earning	Numbers
1	< 10000	0
2	10000-30000	2
3	More than 30000	3
Total		5

#### Financial Assistant

S. No	Financial Assistant	Numbers
1	Receiving	0
2	Not Receiving	5
Total		5

#### Numbers of Children

S. No	Children	Numbers
1	1	5
2	2	0
3	More than 2	0
Total		5

## COVID-19 THREAT FEATURES

In the present study parents were asked to respond whether they or their children experienced any change as a result of COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions and closure of school and childcare. Following factors were analysed based on open-ended qualitative questions.

On the level of parents, factors noted were: stress, physical health, relationship/ interactions with family members, relationship/ interactions with child (ren). On the level of child (ren)'s, the aspects analysed were: physical health, and academics/ learning. Parents were asked whether they tested

positive (0 = no, 1 = yes); these responses could include a partner or spouse, child, family member, friend, or someone else they know. Finally, parents were asked an open-ended qualitative question, "In general, how has your life been affected (e.g., mental, physical, financial health, relationship difficulties, etc.) by COVID-19 and recommendations to isolate?"

## RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The study will be quite relevant to understand the arrangements made by the single parents during the time of Covid-19 pandemic. The study will bring forward the socio-economic challenges and hardship the single parents are likely to come across for being

a fragile group of a section that is neglected by the community and the government.

## DATA ANALYSIS

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During the Covid time, many single earner families have faced unemployment issues without the safety net of elder family members, who can't risk helping with child care. In such a case the single parents' innovated their own ideas to cope up with the isolation phase. Single parents who could not manage to do so have suffered mental setbacks that hampered the emotional well being of the children.

## RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCE

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Pooja (name changed), is a single mother of a 5 years old girl child. She lives with her mother who is nearly in her 70s. Pooja is a lecturer in a government school. She was allowed to work from home and was getting her salary on time. For her, finance was not a problem but an uncertain future was a bothering issue for her and her mother. Since pooja's mother was also facing health issues they could not find a hospital which could look after her mother's ailment. "Living in a hilly remote area medical facility is always a problem and at the time when the only hospital was also declared Covid centre, I could not get basic medicines", said the 34 year old single mother. "My daughter's school got closed on 15<sup>th</sup> march and it's been nine months the school is giving online lessons. For such a small kid online learning is not meaningful. Rather it is an added burden to parents", informed Pooja.

Unlike Pooja, Sonia, an assistant professor in a government college shared that, "during the peak of the pandemic we were allowed to work from home but it was more challenging for me rather than working at the work place." Sonia doesn't own a house; she lives with her parents and brother with her 4 year old daughter. "Before Covid, most of my time would go in office, so I was away from family gossip. Working from home dragged me into gossiping and that brought many issues between my brother and sister-in-law. Staying an entire day with

your parental family when you are married is difficult", she mentioned. In her opinion, "there are many other issues other than money which a single mother has to deal with. Indians lack acceptance and empathy for single parents. We do not want to be pitied, take us as normal."

Single parents (widows, divorcees, separated or single by choice) face enormous challenges every day. Manjula, an administrative officer in a private college in Dehradun lost her job in May. The mother of a teenage school-going girl battles the constant terror of being infected. "I have never felt more isolated like this before. My family members said that, had I not divorced my partner that I would have been at a better place during the lockdown, but I do not regret". COVID-19 fears don't bother Manjula as much as timely paying the school fees for her daughter who could be barred from attending online classes. New organisations are not hiring the employees in the Covid period. Monthly rent of the house and the daily expenses has piled up making situation worse for her.

Rajlakshmi, an Assistant Professor in a reputed public sector college of Dehradun and a single parent, has a son in class 10<sup>th</sup>. The professor of economics said, "every single parent is struggling: those leaving their children with caretakers going out for work and also the ones working from home with kids". The Professor has a good earning. "Thankfully the salary did not get affected because of the financial strain on the economy", she mentioned. Schools started online classes as soon as the physical schools got closed. Rajlakshmi is not friendly with the new technology. Her 15 year old son expected some assistance from her. "My son would sit every morning in his school shirt to attend the classes without any clue of correcting the laptop if anything goes wrong. The login directions were a bit confusing for both of us. I tried to understand and explain him but he swatted me. I got his actions. Teenagers don't like parents to teach them especially when it comes to technology. Meanwhile, my phone was reminding me of unread messages from the college head. I too was answerable to deadlines and colleagues and bosses.

Recommendations to increase physical distancing as well as to close schools, childcare agencies, and many customer services has exacerbated stress in many households. Families experienced increased social isolation, economic difficulties along with an inability to access supportive services. Parents' perceived impact of COVID-19 is linked with increased parenting stress resulting in high risk of harsh parenting. No single factor is solely connected to child maltreatment. It is always an accumulation of risk factors that gives adverse outcomes. Consequently, parents who experience cumulative stress show comparatively rigid and abusive parenting behaviours. Parents who show elevated stress and depressive symptoms are likely to be less responsive to the needs of the children.

Similar symptoms were experienced by a single mother, Abhilasha, of a 4 year old boy living in Dehradun. She works as a finance manager in a hospital. She came in contact with an infected doctor and later tested positive. Since her son tested negative, she had to maintain physical distance from him but it was next to impossible because there was no one around to share her responsibilities. "None of the friends and distant family members were willing to take my son to their house despite his reports being negative" said Abhilasha. She mentioned that she had to give leave to the house attendant and her child's tuition too got affected. For 18 days she stayed at home with her son wearing mask all through the day. Her health deteriorated every day but the doctors had asked her to stay at home because she has a child. "I would dress up my child making him believe that he will go out to play but I had to make excuses. It was quite painful to fool the child but I had no other option but staying at home," mentioned Abhilasha.

Covid pandemic proved to be a testing time for most of the families but for the ones who are already occupied with responsibilities to be fulfilled all alone are the ones which got impacted severely. From the above mentioned case studies it can be summed up that shutting down of schools, day care facilities and other child care assistance burdened

the single parents leading to stress and a chronic feeling of guilt. The mothers involved in the study had a testing time during the Covid pandemic but despite facing set backs from all around they emerged out superlatively.

This study has got a few limitations. The sample size was relatively small and only families involved with service agencies and educational settings in Dehradun, Uttarakhand were included. Largely the sample of the study comprised of mothers excluding the single fathers. The sample also included parents with a single child under the age of 18 years. Despite the limitations, these findings elucidate an essential association between COVID19 related stressors and health risk with stress perceived by the parents in the study. Moreover, in addition to the emotional, economic and social support parents received from their family members, psychologists and educators involved in serving families could connect families with other community resources to broaden their social support networks.

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