Pakistan Social Sciences Review
www.pssr.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

Maternal Stress and Resilience: The Role of Social Support in Single Mothers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how social support impacts maternal stress and resilience among single mothers. Single mothers experience a high level of stress due to the dual burden of parenting and economic contribution. The role of social support is important in reducing stress and increasing resilience among single mothers. The data consists of two groups, an equal participants in each group. Data was recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, using standardized measuring scales, the Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and the Brief Resilience Coping Scale (BRCS). Regression analysis revealed that social support is a predictor of both maternal stress and resilience. Furthermore, widowed mothers reported higher scores on perceived social support and resilience compared to divorced mothers. Therefore, improving and enhancing access to the social support network for single mothers is recommended, which will help them adopt better parenting practices and contribute to a healthy family environment.

| **KEYWORDS** | Social Support, Maternal Stress, Resilience, Divorced Mother, Widowed Mother |

Introduction

Being a mother is not easy, even for married mothers; however, it's likely to be more demanding for single mothers who are the primary caregivers and the only providers for their children. A single mother is referred to adult woman without a partner living with at least one child below 15 years (Zagel & Hübgen, 2018). Divorced, widowed, and unmarried women are known as single mothers (Nahar et al., 2020). In this study, we refer to either divorcees or widows as single mothers. Divorced mothers struggle to fulfill the needs of their young ones while the father is not present (Khalid et al., 2023). Divorced mothers face challenges in providing the necessities of life for their offspring, like meals, clothes, education, and other essentials, compared to married mothers (Islam & Naz, 2018). In addition to the loss of a partner and grief, widowed mothers also encounter similar difficulties. The absence of a spouse is particularly problematic for women, as they often bear the complete burden of emotional and practical stressors of parenthood.

Parenting stress is the cognitive, emotional, and physiological pressure encountered by mothers in reaction to the demands and stresses of raising children. It is characterized by a feeling of overburdened stress, frustration, and exhaustion, often triggered by problems such as child-rearing responsibilities, economic challenges, marital problems, insufficient social support, work-life balance, and difficulties with the children (Coşkuner Aktaş & Çiçek, 2023; Cusinato et al., 2020). The scenario after divorce or widowhood is usually quite difficult for the mother, they often faces economic distress, emotional issues, and increased responsibilities. Stress in single parents usually

occurs as a result of a critical financial situation, the absence of social support, and the additional demands stemming from the exclusive care and upbringing of the child (Dor, 2021).

Social support is a primary requirement for single mothers to increase their abilities to deal with their life challenges (Muarifah et al., 2019). Perceived social support enhances emotional and mental stability by promoting healthy interactions, assistance, and validation that result in a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and positive emotions (Lee et al., 2009). Support can come from people in the immediate surroundings, including family, friends, colleagues, and significant others. Social support can be instrumental (for example, economic, childcare, household support), informational, and emotional. Social support recognized protective factor that can help mothers' physical, mental, and emotional health by dealing with stress.

Social support also helps single mothers adjust to life challenges and become resilient. Psychologists define resilience as the process of adjusting to and managing problematic circumstances, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant stress, such as relationship difficulties, severe health challenges, or economic issues (Solivan et al., 2015). Resilience is a flexible and evolving state that helps individuals adjust, maintain stability, and even grow while facing difficulties. Some mothers develop coping strategies to deal with life's challenges, such as building a supportive network of friends, engaging in informal income generation, or pursuing vocational training to enhance job chances (Jafri, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Those mothers who raise children independently and receive social support are positively engaged, confident in their parenting, and maintain healthy relationships with their young ones. Support from other parents also plays a significant role in fostering a constructive parenting approach and yielding favorable child outcomes.

Literature Review

Raising children as single parents is particularly challenging due to various responsibilities, tasks, and emotional issues, which create problems such as isolation, anxiety, and depression (Kim et al., 2018). Additionally, single women often face numerous negative societal behaviors that can vary across different cultures. Single mothers experience multiple challenges related to parenting that extend beyond financial difficulties; they include societal stigma, mental health problems, and inadequate institutional and community support (Jaweed et al., 2025). These stigmas and negativity prevent single mothers from being socially recognized as part of a formal family system, increasing their stress levels and making it difficult for them to integrate into society (Khan et al., 2022).

Furthermore, single mothers are the sole providers for their children and typically endure immense stress due to the dual pressures of child-rearing and expenses (Taylor & Conger, 2017). In some cases, ex-husbands provide financial support for their children, but single mothers cannot rely on their financial help, which compels them to seek employment, creating the need to balance work and household duties (Febrianto, 2020). Working single mothers begin their days by managing child care and household responsibilities before leaving for work. In the workplace, her role shifts as an employee, where she is expected to complete her official duties accurately and professionally (Amir & Kizilbash, 2024). If they unable to fulfill the demand of job then they face consequences as demotion, deduction in salary or jobless. Thus, the stress experienced by single mothers often stems less from the responsibilities of motherhood and more from the

challenges of being single, particularly due to the absence of a partner (Pollmann-Schult, 2018). Difficulties related to child development and behavior exacerbate the stress for mothers. Social support provides guidance and validation to navigate these challenges.

Social support provides emotional, informational, and instrumental support from an immediate social network, which positively affects stress. Social support is defined as the assistance provided by the family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, fellows, and community in different forms, such as physical, emotional, financial, and informational nature to the person in need (Awaliah et al., 2023). Studies have also shown that single mothers' families usually face a decline in social support, diminished supervision of parents, and financial difficulties, all of which increase challenges in coping with day-to-day life (Shakil et al., 2020). In such a situation online supportive network helps mothers; it provides a platform where mother can share their emotions, experiences, concerns, seek advice, and feel less isolated in parenting challenges. When mothers connect and use social networking sites to connect and interact with other mothers, it can help them decrease maternal stress (Nolan et al., 2015).

When single mothers have access to social support, they can better be able to withstand adversity and maintain a positive approach to life, even in challenging times. Social support can be considered a resource that increases the capacity for resilience and decreases maternal stress. Resilience is the capacity to reconstruct oneself positively by improving self-confidence, self-control, acceptance of change, and optimism (Cao et al., 2018). Mother's adaptability to build resilience is affected by internal and external factors. Internal factors involve the support provided within the family, where members work together and provide emotional reassurance. External factors, on the other hand, come from extended family and friends, offering additional social and emotional support (Purandare & Sathiyaseelan, 2018).

Divorced and widowed mothers in Pakistan face similar challenges due to the absence of a father's support in raising children. Both groups often experience emotional issues, financial hardship, household responsibilities, and social stigma, which intensify the stress level and reduce their ability to cope with the circumstances. Despite the shared experiences and difficulties, limited research has been done to compare their experience and investigate the role of social support in building resilience in Pakistan. This study will fill the gap by highlighting the importance of social support, such as family, friends, and significant others, act as a resource helps mothers deal with emotional difficulties and fulfill the responsibilities or motherhood.

Hypothesis

H1: Social support would significantly decrease the score of maternal stress among single mothers.

H2: Social support would significantly increase the score of resilience among single mothers.

H3: There would be a difference between divorced and widowed mothers.

Material and Methods

Participants

This is a quantitative research design. The current research comprised N=80 participants divided into two groups, divorced mothers (n=40) and widowed mothers (n=40). The age ranges of participants were between 26 to 45 years, divorced, and widowed mothers. Purposive and snowball techniques were used to approach Karachi and Pakistan. All single mothers voluntarily participated, and the study was controlled for the variables of 3 years marriage duration, first marriage, and children below 13.

Measures

Demographic form

The demographic form included age, education, socioeconomic status, working status, profession, marital status, years of marriage, number of children, ages of children with gender, and family setup.

Perceived Social Support.

Social support is assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1998). The MSPSS has three subscales: friends, family, and significant other, each assessed with items. It consists of 12 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale, from very strongly disagree (= 1) to very strongly agree (= 7). Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from the total scale of 0.85 to 0.94 and the subscales from 0.81 to 0.93.

Maternal Stress

The Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Berry & Jones (1995). The questionnaire comprised 18 items: half items address negative and stressful parenting dynamics. Responses were collected using a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The parental stress scale demonstrated reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .83 and a test-retest correlation of .81 over 6 weeks.

Resilience

Sinclair and Wallston (2004) created the Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS), which consists of 4 items. BRCS is a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = describes me not at all to 5 = describes me very well. The BRCS internal consistency (α=.76) and test-retest reliability (r=.71).

Research Procedure

The participants approached after getting permission from the authorities. The researcher was debriefed, assured the confidentiality, and informed that there would be no psychological harm in participation. Participants first completed the demographic form, followed by the study questionnaires. All questionnaires were administered in the English language.

Ethical Consideration

The data collection process took three months. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. The fundamental principles of conducting the study, including participant respect, anonymity, right and examiner competence, accountability, and integrity, were maintained during the process.

Results and Discussion

The following chapter presents a detailed statistical analysis of the study data. All the analyses used the statistical package for Social Science (SPSS, version 22.0) with a significance level of .05.

Table 1
Personal Demographic characteristics of all participants (N=80)

Variables	F	%
Socioeconomic status		
Lower Middle	14	17.5
Middle	51	63.8
Upper Middle	15	18.8
Qualification		
Graduation	36	45.0
Master	42	52.5
Postgraduate	2	2.5
Working Type		
Full-Time	62	77.5
Part-Time	2	2.5
Home-based	12	15.0
Online	2	2.5
Family setup		
Joint	60	75.0
Nuclear	12	15.0
Portion (separate cooking)	6	7.5
Portion (without separate cooking)	2	2.5

Table 1 displays the personal demographic characteristics of the research mothers. About socio-economic status (SES), 63.8% of the participants were middle SES, 17.5% were lower SES, and 18.8% were upper SES. Based on educational attainment, 45% of the mothers were graduates, 52.5% were master's degree holders, and 2.5% had postgraduate diplomas.

Employment-related statistics showed that 77.5% of mothers had full-time employment, 15% were doing home businesses, 2.5% were part-time employees, and worked online.

In terms of family structure, 75% of the mothers resided in a joint family system, 15% in a nuclear family system, 7.5% in separate portions with independent cooking arrangements, and 2.5% in portions without separate cooking facilities.

Table 2
Psychometric properties of all Sales among Single Mothers (N=80)

Scale	Mean	SD	Actual range	Cronbach's α
MSPSS	50.61	9.86	27-73	.90
Significant Others subscale	12.40	3.86	5-22	.89
Family subscale	20.08	4.11	10-28	.86
Friend subscale	17.99	4.28	8-24	.88
PSS	53.23	5.40	40-67	.78
BRCS	14.48	1.74	10-18	.38

Table 2 presents the psychometric properties of the study measures used in this research. The results indicate satisfactory alpha values for the multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS), all its subscales, and the parental stress scale (PSS).

Table 3
Summary of Linear Regression Analysis of Social Support as a Predictor of Maternal Stress among Single Mothers (N=80)

Model	B	SE B	B	R²	f	Sig.
Constant	60.95	3.07				
Perceived Social Support	-.15	.06	-.28	.08	6.56	.01
Constant	56.50	2.02				
Significant Other	-.26	.16	-.19	.04	2.88	.09
Constant	59.10	2.97				
Family subscale	-.29	-14	-.22	.05	4.06	.05
Constant	59.41	2.54				
Friend subscale	-.34	.14	-.27	.07	6.25	.01

*p>**, df= 1, 38*

Table 3 reveals the findings of linear regression analysis to measure the impact of social support on decreasing parental stress in single mothers. MSPSS overall score and friend subscale significantly decrease maternal stress. The findings revealed that MSPSS total score explained an 8% variance in maternal stress (R^2 =.8 F (1, 38) = 6.56, p = .01) and significant maternal stress (β =-.28, p =.01). Further, the friend subscale explained 7% variance in maternal stress (R^2 =.8, F (1, 38) =6.25, p=.01), and significantly decrease maternal stress (β =-.33, p =.04). However, the significant other subscale did not decrease the score of maternal stress (β =-.19, t=-1.69, p =.09). Similarly, the family subscale (β =-.22, t=--2.02, p =.05) also did not predict to decrease maternal stress among single mothers.

Table 4
Summary of Linear Regression Analysis of Social Support as a Predictor of Resilience among Single Mothers (N=80)

Model	B	SE B	B	R²	F	Sig.
Constant	9.89	.881				
Perceived Social Support	.09	.02	.51	.26	27.99	.00
Constant	12.25	.61				
Significant Other	.18	.05	.40	.16	14.84	.00
Constant	10.87	.89				
Family subscale	.18	.04	.42	.18	17.15	.00
Constant	11.35	.77				
Friend subscale	.17	.04	.43	.18	17.55	.00

p > ****.05, df = 1, 38

Table 4 reveals the findings of linear regression analysis to analyze the influence of social support on increased resilience in single mothers. MSPSS overall score, significant other, family, and friend subscales significantly increased the resilience score. The finding of regression analysis showed that MSPSS total score explained a 26% variance in resilience (R^2 =.26 F (1, 38) = 27.99, p = .00) and significantly increased resilience (β =.51, p =.00). Further, significant other subscale explained 16% variance in resilience (R^2 =.16, F (1, 38) =14.84, p=.00), and significantly increase resilience (β =.40, p =.00). Moreover, the family subscale explained 18% variance resilience (R^2 = .18, F (1, 38) = 17.15, p =.00), and significantly increase resilience (β = .42, p =.00). The friend subscale

explained 18% variance resilience (R^2 = .15, F (1, 38) = 17.55, p =.00), and significantly increase resilience (β = .43, p =.00) in single mothers.

Table 5
Compare the mean of married mothers living with their husbands and married mothers in a distant relationship.

	Divorced Mother		Widowed Mother					
Group	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*Df*	*P*	*Cohen's D*
Social Support	45.90	1.49	55.33	1.25	-4.84	78	.00	-6.86
Significant Other	11.05	2.74	13.75	4.35	-3.32	78	.00	-0.74
Family	18.52	4.44	21.63	3.09	-3.62	78	.00	-0.81
Friend	16.23	4.45	19.75	3.30	-4.02	78	.00	-0.90
Parental Stress	53.15	5.77	53.30	5.08	-.12	78	.90	-0.03
Resilience	13.98	1.46	14.98	1.86	-2.67	78	.00	-0.60

Table 5 indicates the results of the independent-sample t-test comparing the means of divorced mothers and widowed mothers. The mean difference between the groups on perceived social support (t (78) = -4.84, p = .00), significant other subscale (t (78) = -3.32, p = .00), family subscale (t (78) = -3.62, p = .00), friend subscale (t (78) = -4.02, p = .00) and resilience (t (78) = -2.67, p = .00) was found statistically significant, suggesting that widowed mothers reported having higher social support and resilience as compared to divorced mothers. Cohen's d for perceived social support, significant others, family, and friends was 6.86, -0.74, -0.81, -0.90, and -0.60, respectively. However, the mean differences between the groups on the variable maternal stress (t (78) = -.12, p =.90) were not found statistically significant.

Discussion

This study explored the influence of social support on reducing maternal stress and enhancing resilience in single mothers. The results of the first hypothesis show that perceived social support and friend support predict lower maternal stress among single mothers. Social support helps manage the demands of parenting, making it a crucial resource for single parents. Friends can be an important and dependable form of support when a single mother faces difficulties (Zhou & Taylor, 2022). Friend networks offer various forms of validation and understanding, which can be particularly vital for those managing the challenges of single parenting. However, the results also indicate that support from significant others and family is less impactful in reducing stress. This may be because dual responsibilities leave them with less time to form new relationships and connect with others. They are sole providers for their children and often feel significant stress due to the double demands of parenting and financial burden (Taylor & Conger, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings of the second hypothesis indicate that perceived social support, along with all three components of social support significant others, family, and friends significantly enhances resilience among single mothers. Social support plays a crucial role in building resilience during challenging life situations (Awaliah et al., 2023; Masten, 2018). Resilience develops from supportive connections with parents, peers, and others, as well as from cultural values and traditions that assist individuals in managing life's fluctuations (Kjellstrand & Harper, 2012). Research also shows that supportive networks, community-based prenatal training, counseling, and support groups for mothers can bolster their resilience (Ge-Ge, 2024; Verner et al., 2021). Additionally, many

single parents perceive single parenthood as beneficial since it offers the freedom of choice, eliminates conflicts with partners, and requires the extra effort to develop and maintain new relationships (Schneider et al., 2001).

Moreover, the results of the third hypothesis revealed that both groups differ significantly in several key areas. Specifically, widowed mothers reported high perceived social support, as well as support from significant others, family, friends, and resilience, compared to divorced mothers, due to the universally tragic circumstance of being single mothers. Widowed mothers receive unique forms of societal support that may differ from those available to divorced mothers (Mamidanna et al., 2024). However, no significant difference was found between divorced and widowed mothers regarding maternal stress, indicating that both groups experience the same levels of parenting stress. Despite having different marital statuses, single mothers face nearly similar hardships in life while raising children (Khan et al., 2022). Social support can also assist parents in regulating their emotional responses and reducing the use of harsh parental practices, which leads to more consistent parenting approaches and greater parental warmth (Marroquín, 2011; Byrnes & Miller, 2012; McConnell et al., 2011). Social support can provide effective parenting advice and guidance (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003).

Conclusion

The study findings indicated that perceived social support decreased maternal support and increased resilience among single mothers. The differences between the two groups shed light on some uncommon challenges and supportive experiences linked to each group of single motherhood. Widowed mothers exhibited higher perceived social support and resilience levels than divorced mothers. This suggests that widowhood may receive different forms of social support and demonstrate greater resilience, possibly due to social perceptions and cultural norms. Interestingly, divorced and widowed mothers did not show any difference in levels of maternal stress, indicating that both face some common challenges while raising children alone.

Recommendations

Although this study provides valuable insight into single mothers' hardships, it also has some limitations. The small sample size and the study's control variables, including the mother's age group, children's age, single marriage experience, and qualifications, limit generalizability. Future research should aim to collect and evaluate a broad spectrum of marriage experiences and investigate a larger sample size. Additionally, future studies should explore these variables in greater depth using diverse methodologies. Furthermore, support systems for mothers help in improving mental health, promoting positive parenting, and creating a healthy environment for both mothers and children.

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