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## **Kinship Practices among Single Parent Families: An Anthropological Review of Social Support Networks and Childcare Strategies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the intricate tapestry of family structures, single-parent families stand as a unique and dynamic demographic. This anthropological review delves into the role of kinship practices within single-parent households, illuminating how these practices shape social support networks and childcare strategies, providing insights into the resilience and adaptability of families facing the challenges of single parenthood. Hence, this study objectives attempt to fulfilled the requirement of anthropological approach to study the ability to provide the child care, household management, well-being, resilience, of single-parents in different sociocultural settings with balancing their own personal life using kinship practices as a coping method. This study is based on purposively selected ten single father families and ten single mother families of Seethawaka DS division, Colombo district, Sri Lanka. The qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, case studies, focus group discussions and observation methods. The research findings revealed that all the single fathers are employed but only one single mother rely on the extended family income while the others engage in occupations. Accordingly, some single mothers are vulnerable in economic aspect where seeks for her parent's support to up bring the children. 100% of positive compliments were identified in children's school attendance, in addition, it was stated that children from these households have a more significant amount of participation in sports at school. These children's academic performances were poor according to the student report card analysis. While 50% of the sample was nuclear families and socialization process and personality molding of children in a critical aspect but the extended family structure provided supportive network for the children identify their gender roles and build up their personality. Further, the study revealed that single mothers experiencing social and cultural stigma even in their own kindred, while the evolving gender dynamics within single-parent families, with an increasing recognition of fathers' capacity to play active roles in childcare and household responsibilities. In conclusion, this research enriches our understanding of the challenges and adaptations experienced by single parents in Sri Lanka, calling for comprehensive and inclusive policies and support systems that empower and uplift single-parent families, contributing to their well-being and that of their children.

**KEYWORDS:** *Childcare, Kinship Practices, Single Parent Families, Social Support, Sri Lanka*

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## Introduction

'Family' is one of the words most commonly used in anthropological writings and discussions, and yet its meaning is neither always clear nor a matter of consensus. It may for instance refer to the domestic group or household, to close kin who are not co-resident, such as parents and adult offspring, or to a much wider network or deeper genealogy of kinship (Barnard & Spencer 1996). Most definitions on family reflect an assumption that there will be two (and only two) parents who are of different genders. Defining family is more complex about families where divorce, desertion, separation occurs (Dolch et.al 2007) where the approach leads to the single parent families. Azuka-Obieke (2016) explains that Single parenting a situation when a mother or father who looks after his or her children on their own, without the input of the other partner. He further states that Single parenting have been on the increase, although the actual percentage is unknown, but practical experience revealed that there is an increase of single parenthood in all over the world. With the rise in the number of single-parent households, scholarly attention on the aforementioned family form has increased significantly. The increased concern with single parent families have often manifested itself as a concern about a growing 'problem', a problem that may threaten the family (Gongla & Thompson 1987). These families are characterized by the absence of one biological parent, and their experiences and challenges are shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Among these factors, kinship practices play a crucial role in providing social support and shaping childcare strategies within single-parent households.

In the Sri Lankan context, a predominantly patriarchal society, extant anthropological research has predominantly directed its focus towards understanding the roles and experiences of single mothers, often sidelining the experiences of single fathers. De Silva's (2015) seminal work underscores the challenges encountered by single mothers within the Sri Lankan societal framework, particularly in their familial roles and support systems. In tandem, Goonesekere's study (2010) offers a nuanced perspective by shedding light on the kinship practices and support networks within the context of single-parent families in Sri Lanka, elucidating the indispensable role played by social connections and familial bonds in the lives of single mothers and their offspring.

Consequently, it is noteworthy that studies adopting a sociological lens to elucidate the multifaceted nature of single-parent families in Sri Lanka have predominantly centered their discourse on single mother family structures and their evolutionary trajectories within the Sri Lankan societal fabric. This asymmetry in research focus potentially perpetuates an imbalance in our understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by single fathers within this context. Within Sri Lanka's traditional patriarchal agrarian society, deeply entrenched cultural norms have delineated gender roles, resulting in a situation where men are often afforded limited opportunities for active participation in childcare and domestic responsibilities. Simultaneously, women are frequently constrained by the prevailing gender

constructs, which restrict their involvement in economic pursuits and their capacity to meet the financial exigencies of the family unit (Obeyesekere, 1967). This intricate interplay of cultural norms and gender roles warrants close examination in the quest to comprehend the dynamics of single-parent families within Sri Lanka (Jayawardena, 2000).

The role of social support within kinship networks is a critical facet of understanding the dynamics of single-parent families in Sri Lanka and beyond. Anderson and Greene's recent study (2022) offers valuable insights into how single fathers within these networks receive kinship support, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which familial bonds play a role in their lives. Additionally, Barlow and Patel's research (2021) delves into the intricate web of kinship networks and coping strategies adopted by single mothers residing in urban areas, elucidating the indispensable nature of social support in their daily lives. Furthermore, James and Peterson's national assessment (2019) provides a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of kinship support on the overall well-being of single mothers, underscoring the far-reaching effects of these support systems. These studies collectively underscore the significance of kinship networks and social support in the lives of single-parent families, adding a crucial layer to our understanding of the challenges and coping mechanisms within this familial framework.

The exploration of social support within the cultural landscape of Sri Lanka is intricately intertwined with the gender dynamics and familial structures of the society. Kapadia's ethnographic study (1989) delves into the origins of sexual inequality, offering essential insights into the gender roles that underpin Sri Lankan families. These gender roles, deeply ingrained in the culture, play a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of social support networks within the familial framework. Furthermore, Bloch's comprehensive village study (1973) in Sri Lanka provides invaluable perspectives into the stability and shifts occurring in family and community structures over time. Such insights are fundamental in comprehending the evolution of social support mechanisms and the adaptive strategies employed within Sri Lankan families, offering a multifaceted view of the intricate interplay between culture, gender, and familial bonds in the context of social support.

In contrast, the childcare strategies and kinship networks of single parent families vary in various global contexts, including Sri Lanka, which offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of single-parent families. Caldwell and Taylor's examination (2019) of the role of siblings in childcare within single-parent families underscores the significance of intra-familial relationships in providing support. In contrast, Coleman and Sanchez's comparative study (2022) explores intergenerational relationships and kinship support, shedding light on the variations in support networks across cultural contexts. Additionally, Kim and Lee's research (2020) delves into cultural norms and childcare practices in single-parent families in South Korea and the United States, highlighting the influence of culture on childcare strategies. In the Sri Lankan context, Bandara's work (2018) on female-headed households illustrates the complexities of balancing work and family responsibilities within

the specific cultural milieu of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, Abeyasekera's perspective (1991) on time, family, and community offers insights into the broader societal framework that shapes childcare strategies and kinship networks in Sri Lanka. By comparing these studies from diverse global contexts with the Sri Lankan context, it gives a comprehensive understanding of how cultural norms, familial relationships, and societal structures intersect to shape childcare strategies and kinship networks within single-parent families worldwide. Such a comparative analysis enriches our appreciation of the nuanced dynamics at play in these familial structures and underscores the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when examining kinship and childcare practices.

Further, Longitudinal and comparative analyses of single-parent families, with a special focus on kinship practices and their impact on social support networks and childcare strategies, provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of these families over time and across diverse contexts. Shearer's work (2008) on family and kinship in Sri Lanka serves as a foundational reference, offering cultural insights into the intricacies of familial relationships within the Sri Lankan context. Hays' exploration (1996) of the cultural contradictions of motherhood provides a broader theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of parenting roles. In a longitudinal context, Hsu and Chen's study (2022) examines parenting roles and kinship networks within single-parent families over time, offering a dynamic perspective on how these relationships evolve. Additionally, Martinez and Rodriguez's research (2022) investigates the influence of kinship networks on single parenting in both rural and urban settings, providing a comparative lens through which to explore the impact of context on familial support systems. Drawing from the Sri Lankan context, Perera's qualitative study (2016) on women's experiences of divorce adds depth to our understanding of the challenges and support mechanisms within single-parent families. Fernando's work (2011) on single mothers in Sri Lanka delves into coping strategies and social support, shedding light on the ways in which kinship practices and social networks contribute to the well-being of single mothers. Through longitudinal and comparative analyses, these studies collectively contribute to a comprehensive perspective on the interplay between kinship practices, social support networks, and childcare strategies within the unique context of single-parent families, enriching our understanding of the complexities inherent in these familial structures.

The above literature review has undertaken an anthropological exploration of kinship practices among single-parent families, with a specific focus on the intricate interplay of social support networks and childcare strategies within the unique context of Sri Lanka. The research conducted in this field has significantly enriched our understanding of the challenges and adaptations experienced by single mothers in the country. Studies such as those by De Silva (2015), Goonesekere (2010), Perera (2016), and Fernando (2011) have offered valuable insights into the experiences, support systems, and coping strategies of single mothers, contributing to a more comprehensive picture of single parenthood in Sri Lanka. However, it is imperative to acknowledge a noteworthy research gap that emerges

from the literature reviewed. While these studies have shed light on the experiences of single mothers, there remains a marked lack of comprehensive research on single fatherhood within the Sri Lankan context. The unique challenges, support networks, and childcare strategies employed by single fathers in Sri Lanka have yet to be thoroughly explored and documented. This research gap limits our ability to fully grasp the diversity and complexity of single-parent families in Sri Lanka and calls for further investigations into the experiences of single fathers, considering the cultural and societal nuances that shape their roles and dynamics.

As this research moves forward in the exploration of kinship practices among single-parent families in Sri Lanka, it is crucial to address this research gap by actively engaging with the experiences of single fathers. Such research endeavors can provide a more holistic understanding of single parenthood in the country, ultimately leading to more informed policies and support systems for all single-parent families, regardless of gender. In this regard, Rajapakse's study (2002) on single mothers in Sri Lanka, while valuable, serves as a poignant reminder of the need for a broader and more inclusive research approach that encompasses the experiences of both single mothers and single fathers to tell the complete story of single parenthood in Sri Lanka. Hence, the research tends to investigate and comprehend how the role of kinship practices affects single-parent families with special reference to the social support networks and childcare strategies in contemporary society.

The objectives of the research lean towards;

To explore the various kinship practices and social support networks established by single parents within diverse cultural contexts.

To examine the cultural norms, traditions, and values that shape kinship practices within single-parent families.

To analyze the influence of kinship practices on the childcare strategies employed by single parents, considering both shared and unique practices.

To assess the impact of kinship practices on the well-being, resilience, and cultural continuity of single-parent families in different sociocultural settings.

To contribute valuable insights to the fields of anthropology and family studies, shedding light on the adaptive strategies employed by single parents and their kin to navigate the challenges of single parenthood.

By pursuing these objectives, this anthropological review seeks to advance our understanding of kinship practices among single-parent families, highlighting their significance as a source of support, cultural continuity, and resilience within diverse family structures.

## **Methodology**

For this study, a qualitative research design has been applied as it allows for an in-depth exploration of kinship practices, social support networks, and childcare strategies in single-parent families. Further, through qualitative methods, the researcher captured the nuances, perceptions, and experiences of individuals involved in the study. The purpose of this study is to identify Kinship ties as a social support networks and childcare strategies in single parent families. Therefore, a family that headed by a male or female with the exclusive custody and was raising one or more children (under the age of 18) by himself or herself due to the death, separation, desertion, divorce, and migration of the spouse at the time of the study was referred to as a "single parent" in order to achieve the objectives of the research. Ten single mother headed families and ten single father headed families have been purposively selected by considering factors like age, gender, socioeconomic status, and family structures. As the research area of the study Seethawaka Ds Division was selected since it is a suburb in Colombo District that marked high migrated population density which consists with multi ethno-religious groups. This diversity can provide insights into how kinship practices and support networks vary across different socioeconomic contexts.

The qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, case studies, focus group discussions and observation methods. A semi structured interview schedule has been used without monetary reward to collect systematic information about the socio-demographic status, educational, religious and social-psychological resources available in study area. Since the qualitative technique looks out real data and emotional responses rather, the research has become more viable. The researcher is free to pursue any response in order to add depth and complexity to the data being collected because the qualitative approach is flexible. Simple statistic approach was preferred in this anthropological research to approaching objective explanation to underlying cause of patterns and meaningful relationships. Therefore, the data analyzing process has been done by using Microsoft package.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Types of Kinship Networks***

The results of the investigation into the composition and structure of kinship networks in single-parent families reveal intriguing insights into the diverse configurations of these networks. The study encompassed 10 selected single father families, of which the majority (60%) was identified as extended families. These extended families, characterized by the inclusion of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended relatives, reflect a broader support system that plays a pivotal role in single fathers' lives. Within the traditional cultural context of Sri Lanka, where father's role often limit opportunities for active participation in childcare and household activities, the extended family setting emerges as a significant advantage. One family was classified as a complex nuclear family, indicating the presence of

multiple generations within a single household, while the remaining three families were classified as nuclear families, suggesting a more restricted network predominantly composed of the single father and his children. In contrast, the 10 selected single mother families exhibited a different distribution of kinship network structures. Four of these families were identified as extended families, signifying the presence of a wider circle of relatives who are actively involved in the support system of single mothers. Two families were classified as complex nuclear families, indicative of multigenerational cohabitation, and the remaining four families were categorized as nuclear families, highlighting the core unit of the single mother and her children.

These results underscore the variability in the composition and structure of kinship networks among single-parent families. Single fathers, more often than single mothers; appear to have extended families as their primary support system. This could be attributed to cultural norms or gender roles that influence the extent of involvement of extended family members in caregiving and support. In contrast, single mothers exhibit a slightly more varied distribution of network structures, including extended families, complex nuclear families, and nuclear families. These findings emphasize the importance of considering the specific dynamics of kinship networks when examining the experiences and challenges faced by single parents, as these networks play a crucial role in shaping their support systems and childcare strategies.

### ***Social Support Mechanisms***

The results pertaining to social support mechanisms within single-parent families offer a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of these networks, particularly with regard to emotional support, financial assistance, and practical help. It is notable that all single fathers in the study were employed; reflecting a source of financial stability that inherently contributes to their economic resilience. In contrast, nine out of ten single mothers were employed, but one single mother relied on extended family income, which underscores a potential vulnerability in their economic circumstances. These findings are particularly significant in the context of contemporary gender equality, where both genders have equal rights to engage in the family's income generation. However, despite this equitable framework, the results indicate that single mothers still face economic vulnerabilities, emphasizing the persistence of gender disparities in economic empowerment.

Moreover, the study unveiled an important dimension of social support mechanisms, notably the presence of social stigma experienced by single mothers in the Seethawaka region of Sri Lanka. The qualitative data suggested that single mothers, especially the two widows belonging to Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities, grapple with social and cultural stigma, which compounds the challenges they face. This aspect highlights the enduring influence of traditional norms and societal attitudes that can impact the well-being of single mothers, even in the modern world. In summary, the results underscore the complexity of social support mechanisms within single-parent families, with single mothers facing unique

challenges, including economic vulnerability and social stigma. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive support systems and interventions that address the specific needs and circumstances of single mothers, while also challenging and transforming persisting gender biases and social norms to create a more equitable and inclusive environment for all single parents.

### *Childcare Arrangements and Impact on Children*

The examination of childcare arrangements and their impact on children within single-parent families reveals several noteworthy findings. Firstly, it is encouraging to note that children from single-parent households, whether headed by single fathers or single mothers, demonstrated regular school attendance. This consistency in school attendance suggests a commitment to education within these families, potentially serving as a stabilizing factor in the lives of these children in this modern world. However, the analysis of academic performance highlights some variations between single father and single mother households. Children from single mother families exhibited stronger academic performance, reaching a sound stage. In contrast, children from single father households faced less supervision of school homework. These findings indicate potential differences in the educational support and involvement of single parents, which may impact the academic outcomes of their children.

Furthermore, the results reveal distinct patterns in extracurricular activities. Eight children from single father households engaged in sports, while six children from single mother families participated in aesthetic subjects such as music, dancing, and arts. These differences in extracurricular choices may reflect varying interests and opportunities available within these households, potentially influenced by parental preferences and resources. Further, these choices have molded the personality of these children. Additionally, the participation of single parents in school-related activities, such as parent meetings, is noteworthy. Only four single fathers and five single mothers regularly attended parent meetings in schools, while others delegated this responsibility to a member of the extended family or kinship network. This delegation of parental involvement in school-related matters suggests a collaborative approach to childcare within these networks, emphasizing the significance of extended family support in ensuring the well-being of the children.

However, there are also challenges evident in the results. Four single fathers with daughters expressed discomfort in meeting the emotional needs of their children, highlighting potential gender-based limitations in providing emotional support. Furthermore, the observation of a grandparent within an extended family, where a single mother headed the household, underscores the complexities of managing children's behavior and attention within such family structures. The findings regarding childcare arrangements and their impact on children within single-parent families reveal a complex interplay of factors, including academic performance, extracurricular activities, parental involvement in school-related

matters, and gender-based challenges in emotional support. These results underscore the importance of considering the unique dynamics within single-parent households and the role of kinship networks in shaping the well-being, socialization, and cultural identity of children rose in these families.

### ***Challenges, Resilience and Gender Dynamics***

The results regarding challenges, resilience, and gender dynamics within single-parent families shed light on the complexities of these familial structures in the context of Sri Lanka. One striking observation is that in modern Sri Lanka, the preferred family structure is often considered to be the nuclear family. Consequently, being a single parent within this societal framework can present unique challenges and expectations. Single mothers in the study often reported having the support of their extended families. However, it is noteworthy that some single mothers expressed a desire to prove to the world that they can independently raise their children without external support. This aspiration highlights their resilience and determination to challenge traditional perceptions of single motherhood and their capability as sole caregivers.

In contrast, the situation for single fathers, especially the two single fathers, who became single parents due to the death of a spouse and have children less than 12 years of age, revealed a different set of challenges. These fathers faced pressure from their kinship networks to remarry, reflecting societal beliefs that fathers are incapable of adequately caring for children and managing household activities. One father's sentiment underscores *“the importance of recognizing that the 21st century offers both genders equal rights and opportunities for engagement in childrearing”*. This highlights the evolving gender dynamics and expectations within single-parent families, indicating a shift towards more equitable roles for fathers in childrearing. Overall, the results illustrate the resilience and adaptability of single-parent families in the face of societal norms and expectations. Whether mothers or fathers, all single parents have navigated these challenges with determination and a desire to provide the best possible upbringing for their children. Moreover, the findings emphasize the evolving gender dynamics within single-parent families, with an increasing recognition of fathers' capacity to play active roles in childcare and household responsibilities. These insights contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay of challenges, resilience, and evolving gender roles within single-parent families in Sri Lanka.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this anthropological review of kinship practices among single-parent families conducted in the Seethawaka DS division of Colombo district, Sri Lanka, has offered valuable insights into the complex dynamics of these families within a unique cultural context. The findings have highlighted the crucial role played by kinship ties in providing resources and stability to single-parent families, underscoring the resilience, adaptability,

and determination exhibited by these families in the face of various challenges. These insights hold significant policy implications for the development of social policies and support systems tailored to the needs of single-parent families. Recognizing the importance of kinship networks, policymakers can consider the following recommendations. According to the study single mothers often rely on extended family support; policies should aim to strengthen this network further. Initiatives such as providing financial assistance, legal protections, and access to education and job opportunities can empower single mothers within their extended families.

The study also revealed evolving gender dynamics, with some single fathers taking on active roles in childcare and household responsibilities. Policies should promote and celebrate these progressive roles, fostering greater gender equality within single-parent families. Hence, cultural norms and expectations influence kinship practices, the policymakers must be sensitive to the diverse cultural contexts within Sri Lanka and design support systems that respect and accommodate these differences. The study reveals that both single mothers and single father do need the mental health support. Recognizing the stress and challenges faced by single parents, mental health support services should be readily accessible. This can include counseling, stress management programs, and community support groups. Further, Encouraging access to education and employment opportunities for both single mothers and fathers can enhance their financial stability, reducing the economic vulnerabilities faced by single-parent families. Policies should prioritize the well-being and best interests of children raised in single-parent families. This can involve educational support, access to extracurricular activities, and avenues for emotional and psychological support.

By incorporating these insights into social policies and support systems, Sri Lanka can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by single-parent families, ultimately contributing to the well-being and stability of these families and their children. This study underscores the importance of kinship ties in the lives of single parents and the potential for policy interventions to provide meaningful assistance and empowerment within this demographic.

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