

Single Parenting: A Challenge To The Family In The Contemporary Society

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Abstract:- The family in the contemporary society has changed in form and content as compared to those of the yester years. The change can be witnessed through the rampant growth in strange modes of parenting which were hitherto uncommon especially among the Africans. This treatise explicates single mode of parenting particularly that of widowed single fathers and mothers with an aim of examining the challenges inherent in this mode of parenting. The paper also creates awareness that single parents are not just single mothers but includes single fathers as well.

Keywords: *Challenge, Contemporary, Family, Widowed Single Fathers and Mothers*

I. INTRODUCTION

Both in the African society and Christianity the family is of immense importance. It is the very core of life, living and inter-personal relationships as well as communal vitality. Yet it is common knowledge that in the contemporary society families are encountering serious painstaking challenges in many spheres like that of troublesome modes of parenting. It is even more explicit when it comes to single parenting caused by different factors. Unfortunately, there has been a misconception of the term “single parenting” even among some scholars. The term has been taken to exclusively include “single mothers” at the exclusion of “single fathers” analogically [1] like the distortion of the concept “gender” to mean women/females only as if men/males are excluded from the term. Such distortions need to be corrected and a holistic approach to such crucial concepts should be adopted. The paper, therefore, sought to correct such distortions by taking a holistic approach to single parenting encompassing both single fathers and single mothers. Owing to the limitations imposed in the study and the complexity of the categories of single father-hood and mother-hood however, the study deliberately confines itself to the widowed single fathers and mothers. Drawing from the above distortion is that the phenomenon of single motherhood has attracted the attention of theologians, feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers among other scholars. Feminists have continued to advocate for the liberation of women, more so single mothers, as self-determining human beings who deserve equal rights and opportunities to their male counterparts. However, this has been over-accentuated with neglect to single fathers something which the study intends to correct. It is an issue which scholars seem to wish away yet it merits special attention especially. Widowed single fathers face different challenges and sometimes related to those of widowed single mothers that need to be addressed. To guard ourselves from falling into the aforementioned misconception, the study opts for the two modes of single parenting. In the traditional African society, single motherhood was highly discouraged through established traditions, cultural practices, communal support and taboos. When the contrary happened, measures were laid down to curb the situation. A single mother, for instance, would be married off to an old man as a second or third or even fourth wife or to an old woman who could not bear children or even be inherited by her husband’s brother or his paternal cousins. On the other hand, the society would co-operate in ensuring that a widowed single father re-married. It did not matter whether such a single parent was young or advanced in age. The community would do all it took to get a wife for him with or without his co-operation. In any case, since polygamy was common and allowed, to be a widower was a rare phenomenon. In the contemporary society, the situation seems to be out of hand as evidenced by the great numbers of single parents among them widowed single fathers and mothers. It leaves one wondering about the flourishing of this single parenting scenario- hence the concern of the study. One finds oneself asking questions like: Why is this happening at such an amazing number? What does this peculiar mode of parenting mean in relation to traditional acceptable family-hood and normal customary parenting? How can the situation be addressed amicably and fruitfully?

1. Challenges Facing Single Parents

Through content analysis with the aid of mediation theory propagated by Boff and Boff [2], the following challenges have been analyzed. The three mediations especially the second one of socio-analytical mediation serves a great deal in explicating the following challenges which the single parents particularly the

widowed ones have to grapple with. Primary data has been analyzed thematically in view of the subject of the study.

2.1 Parenting Challenges

The challenge seems the most painstaking one since the widowed single fathers and mothers have to struggle to parent singly. As a single parent left alone, one has to struggle to provide for his/her family and fill the gap left by the departed partner. They thus have to double up the role of being both the father and the mother and the vice versa for widows. Some find it difficult to adjust to this mode of parenting especially where the very partner was the sole breadwinner in the family. It is even worst when the parent left is not employed and the children are still dependent on him or her. It has lured some of them into engaging in all kinds of jobs, some dehumanizing, to provide at least the basic needs for their children. Widowed single fathers have to adjust to doing such household chores as cooking, washing and attending to the children. This is confirmed by Ellias Munyi who, as at mid-2014, had been widowed for eighteen years when he said that he had to make several adjustments including surviving on one income, making decisions that his wife used to make and no longer having much of his social life since he has had to spent much time with the children-the four of them being girls [3]. With the increased cost of living and ever cropping demands in life, some of these widowed single fathers and mothers, particularly those left at poor financial state for different reasons such as huge medical expenses in catering for the deceased parent, have been unable to educate their children. As a result, their sons and daughters are forced to drop out of school and engage in manual works such as being house helps where they end up being misused and paid meager wages. Wagua confirms it when she argues that these families may also suffer poverty, as they are unable to make ends meet. Their basic needs are not satisfied and in search of these necessities, they end up in the wrong hands. They become victims of all sorts of exploitations by the rich [4]. The widowed single fathers and mothers are subjected to long hours of hard and unwell paid work. Consequently, they seek other favors and in this way some, especially the single mothers are sexually exploited. Their children are forced out of school to seek employment, whereby, like their parents are exploited and underpaid, or are not paid at all. The worst hit is the girl-child, because she is exposed like the mother to the same abuse. In this way the reality of incomplete family becomes a vicious circle. Nicholaus further affirms it when he argues that children growing in single parent families including those of widowed single parents, are at risk on the lower levels of educational achievement, twice as likely to drop out of school, are more likely to become teen parents, they get into more conflict with their parents and with authorities in general. These children are also more likely to be become truants; frequently abusing drugs and alcohol, engage in high-risk sexual behavior and are twice as likely to join a gang, go to jail or commit suicide [5].

The above situation can be attributed to the fact that due to the aforementioned increasing cost of living, the widowed single parent (father or mother) is often too busy looking for the basic needs; food, clothing, medication, education fees and others and thus has little time for his or her children. When the children are deprived of this paternal or maternal care and guidance, many tend to grow up being unruly, undisciplined and may end up adopting anti-social behavior like drug taking and trafficking, stealing even from their parent and later as youths forming terrorist groups that are detrimental both to themselves and the community welfare. The worst of it is when these children end up in streets and towns and lead miserable lives as we find today [6]. It results into the vicious cycle of poverty as indicated above. The social lives of these children from single parent families are thus deprived in various ways. As explicated above, they are deprived the love of the deceased parent, that is, father's or mother's love and care. The difficulty is becoming more pronounced in the contemporary society because as these children look for an attachment in a female or male figure for socio-cultural and moral role model, they ought to go to the extended family, but they have distanced themselves from it. As a result, socio-cultural identity crisis among the children arises and they are no longer controllable. In the long run they rebel against their single parent and become unruly as pointed out in the foregoing paragraphs. Zani [7] attests to it in her explication of the African family. In addition, difficulties in parenting the boy child in particular have been highlighted as discussed below.

2.1.1 Parenting the Boy Child

There has been an outcry for the boy child in the contemporary society whereby parenting the boy child to become a responsible person has been faulted. It is even worse in the case of single parents. Perhaps the overemphasis on the girl child is to blame for the contemporary problems associated with parenting of the boy child. It is devastating to note that some single parents refer to their sons as *mashetani* (evil spirits); a term that is gaining currency in the contemporary society which was hitherto unheard of. The boy child has become a liability other than an asset and the pride of the family. The African pride in parenting the boy child seems to be fading away in the contemporary society. Rather than training oneself to take up responsibility as expected by the society, he has turned to become dependent even in cases where one's parent, be it the father or the mother is widowed. It is even worse in cases where a son is the only child. Perhaps this is the reason why the African

custom such as that of the Gikūyū tribal custom, requires that a married couple should have at least four children; two male and two female [8]. Further still is that the boy child has become an endangered species. They engage in drug and substance abuse, are recruited in illegal sects such as *mūngiki* and end up being misused. Through such activities they end up being killed, jailed, or contracting diseases particularly HIV/AIDS causing more pain to their only parent. Some of the single mothers particularly those widowed from HIV/AIDS target young men. In fact they seduce them and entice them with money only to infect them and kill them. The boy child seems unproductive and a burden to their families to the extent that some parents have entrusted their property to their daughters; a complete reversal of African traditional transfer of responsibilities where the son took over the role of the father in guarding the family's property.

2.1.2 Parenting Grandchildren

Transfer of parenting responsibility to another party is a trend that is developing in the contemporary society. It is a challenge to single parents whereby they are forced to take care of their children and grandchildren as well. Such cases arise where some widowed single parents are forced to take care of their grandchildren not because their parents are dead but because they have been born out of wedlock. It is attributed to fear of child molesting by foster fathers; a situation that has created worries and anxieties in the contemporary family as witnessed through rampant cases of parent(s) killing their children and themselves. The challenge can also be attributed to the rising cases of separation and divorce in families today that have forced grandparents, among them widowed single fathers and mothers, to take care of grand and great grandchildren. HIV menace among other factors such as negative and superstitious view of physically challenged children can be attributed to the growing trend of parental irresponsibility in the contemporary society.

2.2 Challenges in Re-marrying

Some widowed single parents encounter the challenge of remarrying whereby some wish they could but are opposed by their children due to fear of losing their father or mother to their step-mother or father. They feel they will be denied their paternal or maternal love and care through such remarriages. For other children, they feel they are betraying the memory of their deceased mother or father by accepting their father's new wife or their mother's new husband. While for some children, they oppose it because they are still grieving and may need more time to come to terms with themselves and accept the inevitabilities of life as death. Others will oppose it because, if there are new step brothers and sisters, they feel their space, time and privacy will be infringed. In addition, some do not want to share their father's property with their step mother. Reggy [9] confirms the challenge in her explication of the challenges of widows. These children therefore cannot allow their widowed single parent to remarry but instead, take it upon themselves the role of providing for their parent. In addition, some widowed single fathers would wish to remarry but they cannot get the kind of wives they need, that is, they have difficulties in finding a suitable partner. The challenge is that those who are willing for such remarriages give conditions such as guaranteed inheritance of property. Demarcation of land into small pieces however, prevents most widowed single parents from remarrying since it may not be enough for two wives and their children to share. The conditions which are mostly placed on monetary and materialistic value has made some widowers to equate remarrying to tying a rope round one's neck to imply committing suicide. On the other hand, some wish to re-marry but are worried about the welfare of their children. They fear that their second wives will mistreat the children of the deceased wife retarding their growth and trust in them as their father. They thus opt to remain single and raise their children until they are grown up then they can think of remarriage. It however becomes overwhelming to some, particularly those widowed at early ages who find themselves engaging in the deadly *mipango za kando* (extra-marital affairs). With such affairs their attention to their own families is diverted to the new "family" which becomes strenuous to their children. Others fear remarrying women younger than them who will only stress them up with added responsibilities of providing for more children or infecting them with sexually transmitted infections due to temptation of quenching their sexual urge outside marriage from other able, young and energetic men which may lead to chain of widowhood to the remarried wife or the husband. There are those widowers who avoid remarriages in order to protect their position in the family. The argument here is that the prospective wives whom they can get preferably of their age would in most cases come with children who are grown up. Some of these children could be men or women, educated and formally employed. Most widowed single fathers fear remarrying in such cases, though those are the kind of women they would have loved to live with because of their age but they feel their position as the father in the family will be threatened. At the same time they fear that such grown up children would mistreat the children of the first wife who may be younger in age and thus overrule them even in terms of sharing the widowed single fathers' inheritance. Furthermore, there are those widowed single fathers and mothers who would have wished to remarry but fear losing their wife or husband again. This is particularly so for those widowers who had remarried only to lose their second wife. Due to changing life styles coupled with the rising cases of contagious illnesses and accidents among other fatal factors, some widowed single parents whom the society has helped to

remarry lose their second wives or husbands after a few years of remarriage. In such cases, these widowed single parents fear remarrying again because they fear losing their third marriage partners which would leave them being equally yoked to the added parenting responsibilities. They thus opt to remain single and take care of their children despite the difficulties.

The above also applies for the widows who may wish to remarry but fear for their children. African family is generally patriarchal and the children therefore belong to the father's lineage. To take the children away from their home is thus a serious issue among the Africans which may be termed a curse. Due to the fear of resulting consequences such as lack of tranquil coexistence with others, miscarriages, mysterious deaths among others, some widows opt to remain single. Consequently, some widows prefer getting a child with a man while still remaining in her marital home than moving from their homes to live and be remarried elsewhere. This is because they consider moving out of their marital homes disrespectful both to their children and their departed husbands whom they still want to be identified with. They respect their husbands and have a need to remain 'loyal' to them though physically gone in this earthly life but they believe that they are watching over them in the yonder life. Some would want to fecund without necessarily being remarried and so they opt to choose a man to bear children with, but the other responsibilities remain with them. Even in such cases, such widows have difficulties in restraining from fathers of such children who have often refused to be denied identity with their children and thus remain attached to them through the children. This is well confirmed by Mwititi [10] who has argued that it is more difficult for a widow to remarry than is for a widower. This is because, as he argues, in traditional African society a woman would leave her home to join her husband's family. She and her children belong there even after her husband's death. She cannot therefore walk from her marital family to a new family nor take the children away from their home.

There are staunch Christian widowers who would wish to remarry ecclesiastically but feel the formal wedding as luxurious and unnecessary. Marriage ceremonies in the contemporary society are becoming more expensive, competitive and extravagant as opposed to those of the traditional society. They reflect egoistic elements and the communal role is becoming minimized. Most widowers therefore find it involving and costly to remarry in the Church though they would have loved to do it ecclesiastically. With such financial disability and phobia, some opt to remarry informally and avoid going to the Church or shift to another Church to avoid ridicule and false accusations.

Another challenge in remarrying is where one would wish to remarry but are opposed by the parents. It occurs especially among the Christian families who would consider remarriage of a widowed daughter or son a sinful act and disloyalty to the marriage covenant. Such parents would instead, ask and encourage them to remain faithful to their marital covenant and stay in their marital families. It is a challenge to most widowed single parents especially those widowed at a younger age. As a result, some find themselves engaging in the aforementioned extra-marital affairs which is biblically considered sinful. Notwithstanding the above, some widowed single fathers and mothers decide to remarry in spite of the opposition from their own families. They thus go ahead and remarry without necessarily involving their parents. They do so with joy and hope that they will overcome some of the single parenting challenges among other existential issues. It may work for some time with the concerned parent just watching, keeping quiet and not interfering in anyway but the matter becomes complicated due to the parent's silence. Such widowed single fathers and mothers are doomed to face other challenges which they consider a curse especially that of the mother which they find very disastrous to the family and the children. Life may become very stressful and lonely without the support systems one had been accustomed to over the years.

2.3 Chain of Widowhood

Connected to the above are those widowed single parents whom the community helps them to remarry only to come back to the same mode of parenting. Some lose their second or even third wives before their own transition into the yonder life. In such cases they are left with children from the two or three wives. It is even more challenging for them where the second wife was married when she had other children. These children who are born out of wedlock become problematic to their foster fathers when their mothers die as most of them turn rebellious and unruly. In some cases such children are from a different ethnic group and may find it hard to adjust to socio-religious cultural life of the new family. The truth of the matter is that such single parents are not just widowed single parents but are different in that they had remarried only to come back to this mode of parenting hence they deserve serious scrutiny. Their widowhood narrative especially the parenting challenges they face together with other existential problems which they have to grapple with, greatly differ from those of others. On the other hand, there are those entangled in this mode of parenting together with their children; they and their children remain widowed. Factors such as HIV/AIDS and drug and substance abuse for instance, have caused deaths leaving fathers and mothers widowed. Peculiar cases of a widowed father and son leaves one wondering whether it is a curse or a misfortune. Conversely, there are those who remain tied in widowhood as a result of HIV/AIDS. Some widowed single parents whose consorts have died from HIV remarry, some without

affirming their HIV status and as a result remain tied to the chain of widowhood especially where one loses the second wife or husband. It is interesting to note that some widowed single parents are HIV carriers and as a result infect a couple others with the virus before they themselves die. Still there are those widowed single fathers and mothers who remain in widowhood because they cannot keep a woman or a man respectively. A further inquiry into such situation reveals that such men including some widowers are impotent and thus cannot fecund. For such widowers even the children left under their care are not biologically theirs but have been sired by another man. These kinds of widowers encounter difficulties in remarrying and lowers one's self esteem luring some to alcoholism and drug abuse. Reggy confirms the chain of widowhood from her own life experience being a widow, having been born and raised in a family whose father was a widower before he remarried her mother [11].

2.4 Inheritance of Property

Even though Wachege talks of reformed property inheritance and that a widow can now inherit her husband's property easily [12] it is still a challenge to most widows in the contemporary society. They have to struggle and fight persistently to inherit their husband's property. This is because her matrimonial family considers her "an outsider" since the person who brought her to that family is dead. As a result they want to inherit their son's wealth disregarding the responsibilities that the widow has been left with especially that of parenting. In fact, in some cases these widows have had to file cases in courts in order to get their rights. They are exploited financially and before they win these cases they would have to spend a lot of money which they would have used for other developmental projects had such cases been settled at home. Though such cases may be settled later, these widows are apportioned "symbolic" inheritance since equality is not always pursued. It is surprising to note that even where one's husband is the only son of the family, inheritance of his property is not a guarantee for the widow. If she fails to track persistently and courageously, she will be excluded in the division of land and her in-laws will take the entire parcel of land.

In addition, some widows have been exploited by advocates as they seek justice in such matters. They demand *kitu kidogo* (bribe) in order to fight for them which denies justice to those who cannot afford. Others waste a lot of resources like time and money in these cases while some are overtaken and denied justice. Some give up and are forced to rent houses for themselves and their children while others end up as street families. Worst still is that with the emphasis on equality especially on sharing a parent's property including the daughters, some parents entrust their daughters with title deeds. In some cases these daughters sell their share and come back demanding another share with the parent's support which is exploitative to their widowed sister-in-law. While inheritance of property remains a challenge to most widows, some especially the elite and employed do not find it a challenge. The challenge for these latter widows is how to manage the inheritance productively. Inheritance of property also remains a big challenge to widows in polygamous marriages. Where a husband dies without a will on how his property should be shared amongst his children in all his families, the widows find it difficult to unite their children in allocation of the inheritance. Fights and conflicts arise in most polygamous families causing enmity amongst the children and the widows. Even where the father in such families had written a will, sometimes the will is not honored by the children which causes conflicts and hatred among the children with some especially the enlightened ones exploiting the others who may be disabled financially.

2.5 Socio-Economic Class Stratification and Exploitation

Widowed single fathers and mothers feel discriminated along social class lines. The society and even the Church treat them differently on the basis of their social class so that the affluent are given special treatment and the poor disregarded. They are discriminated against and are treated as Second-Class while they may not be. The traditional African communal way of living is no longer valued or practiced as it used to be. Instead, individualism and socio-economic divisions have taken root and the philosophy of "I, Me and Mine" seems the ideal. Some widowers whose deceased wives were 'rich' and the sole bread winner in their families become the laughing matter in the community and the Church as a result of the demise of their wives. They are discriminated against and their widowhood considered great downfall. Rather than comforting and helping such widowers to come to terms with the loss, they are backbitten and avoided by the other members of the "Family of God." This stratification has also penetrated into the Church to the point that these widowed single fathers and mothers feel that the Church belongs to the affluent minority but the majorities who are poor do not have a place in the Church other than filling the seats in the Church and providing the quorum for discussions that do not matter them. It raises concerns whether the Church is the "Family of God" or the "Family of gods." Reggy confirms the view in her argument that the widows and widowers by implication are treated as Second-Class while they may not be and their homes are termed "broken homes" even when they are struggling to run them smoothly as is expected of any family [13]. Furthermore, they find it unfair when the society associates them with the failures of their children such as those whose children are alcoholics. The society, including the

Church, seems to condemn them hence the wonder whether the Church should judge and condemn “the sinners.” It is amazing to note that even the religious institution where they expect to seek support seem to fail in providing emotional support. Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) exhortation confirms the view where he challenges that: “...if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization.” [14]

2.6 HIV/AIDS and Its Impact

HIV/AIDS is a global concern and has remained one of the deadly diseases that have consumed the lives of many Kenyans from all spheres of life. It has a severe impact on every major institution in our society as confirmed by Wachege [15] when he posits that HIV/AIDS is not only a scourge but a disaster. Other than its serious impact on human life, it has impacted heavily on other sectors such as schooling and education sector, socio-economic sector among other sectors generally lowering the productivity levels while increasing dependency ratios. It has thus caused, among other things, widowhood in families where some have lost their wives and husbands from the menace. Some widows and widowers are both infected and affected by the disease. It has caused them psychosomatic problems such as low self-esteem, depression, stress and despair. Being not only widowed but HIV positive as well, these widowed single fathers and mothers have had to wrestle with life which they have find challenging since some are reduced to being dependent as they cannot be productive. Some have to struggle to provide for themselves and their children who may also be infected. For some, it is a heavy laden which they cannot bear and thus opt to take their lives and those of their children. Thanks to the Government of Kenya in collaboration with Faith-Based Organizations and NGOs which have come to the rescue of such desperate widowed single fathers and mothers by providing health and material support in form of ARVs, VCT, food and clothing among others.

On the other hand, there are those HIV positive widowed single fathers and mothers who resolve to revenge by infecting countless number of people some of which are young boys and girls and the married. There are those whose children have died of HIV/AIDS leaving them with the responsibility of taking care of their grandchildren who may be infected as well. Worst where one is infected and left under the care of such children alone. The family institution thus stands as the most affected by this pandemic. Being a pandemic that affects an individual aggravating with time, HIV/AIDS has caused increased medical expenses that are weighing heavily on the family’s economic stability consuming the finances meant for food, clothing, medical care and education of the children. Wachege corroborates it by explicating how the disaster has not only had serious impact on human life but also socio- economic effects [16] such as rise in the number of orphaned children, burden on families and generally reduced level of productivity by both the affected and infected. In the long run, the family and countries’ economic stability is threatened.

II. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above discussion that single parents particularly the widowed ones grapple with a myriad challenges. Awareness is created that single parents are not just single mothers but includes the single fathers as well who encounter similar and diverse challenges from those of single mothers. Consequently there is need to unearth the issues affecting them in view of holistic parenting in the contemporary society. Furthermore, it can be deduced that there are divergences within this category of single parenthood hence calling for differentiation instead of treating them *en masse*. The growth of this strange mode of parenting in the contemporary society is a threat to holistic family-hood and parenthood which calls for concerted effort from various works of life.

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