

Absent Fatherhood: Implications for Single Mother Families in the Odi Region, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Single-Parenthood. Child Care and Support. Poverty. Illegitimate Kids

ABSTRACT Absent fatherhood is becoming a norm not only in South Africa, but also globally. This paper explored the level of involvement of absent fathers in the lives of their children from the perspective of single mothers. A total of 54 single mothers who were purposively sampled completed a self-administered questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that a considerable number of respondents became mothers at a young age. The study also found that the majority of the fathers opted not to have contact with their children, whereas those who did barely or marginally participated in all aspects of child care and support responsibilities. Absent fatherhood wrecks and polarises children and families, and as such extended family members, community leaders and social welfare organizations must closely work together to prevent broken homes and marriages.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, the number of single-parent families has been on the rise, and today in the United States (US), 19 million children live in single-mother families (Lemmon 2012). According to the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 33 percent of children live with both parents, 39 percent live with their mothers and only 4 percent live with fathers (News24 2014). For working women, about 53 percent in South Africa are single parent, but traditionally, women relied on the financial support of their fathers to sustain the home and for the upkeep of the kids (Fin24 2013).

Fatherhood is a revered social status which may have mixed consequences for the child depending on the marital status of the parents or how partners relate after childbirth. Children who have absent fathers are treated with disdain, particularly those born out of wedlock and those of divorced parents; however those whose father is deceased are treated with much caution and sympathy. While it is considered very important for both parents to raise their children, males are said to have a shorter lifespan, hence there is bound to be some children who will not have a constant father figure in their families (Holland). Apart from natural causes such as premature deaths of fathers contributing to absent fatherhood, divorce and teenage pregnancies play a major role in this social issue and problem.

In a patriarchal and patrilineal society where the children adopt the surname of their father as their identity, this type of adoption is conceived of as a sign of legitimacy and a covenant between one's clan and their ancestors (Mazembo et al. 2013). Absent fatherhood which is a scenario where a biological father does not reside with the child, and or may fail to honour parental duties and obligations, is currently on the rise in South Africa (East et al. 2006; Lewis and Lamb 2007). Evidence revealed that 54 percent of men between the ages of 15 – 49 are fathers, with one out of two fathers being absent in the lives of their children. Previously in South Africa, absent fatherhood was attributed to apartheid which promoted migrant labour; however, evidence reveals that absent fatherhood is currently on the rise as reported in the 1996 to 2009 statistics. The report indicates that African children with absent fathers rose from 45 percent to 52 percent, for coloured children it was from 34 percent to 41 percent, and 13 percent to 15 percent for white children, in the case of the Indian population, it rather decline from 17 to 12 percent (Holborn and Eddy 2011; South African Labour relations Unit (SALDRU) 2010). Therefore, the majority of children in South Africa 42.5 percent are raised in female headed parent households (Statistics South Africa 2012).

Absent fatherhood is laden with negativity with contrasting perceptions in Western and African perspectives. Historically, Western culture regards children born out of wedlock as having no rights; their identity was denied and could never claim inheritance from their father. However, in the African perspective there is a saying that “*ngwana o itsiwekemmaagwe*” which means that the paternity is never in question and every child is accepted without reservation. However, the changes that colonialism brought about in the African social structure have distorted this practice, including narrowing the definition of the family and portraying African fathers as irresponsible, uncaring and authoritative (Ratele et al. 2012). In addition, both industrialisation and urbanisation exacerbate migrant labour and same sex hostel system, which normalised fatherhood absence in South Africa (Department of Social Development 2012). According to Richter et al. (2012), the absence of the father disadvantages children in terms of social position, financial support etc.

Fatherhood has always been associated with security and provision of resources. It represents manliness, virility, the ability to produce and provide. In this light, Ratele (2008) argues that the ability to provide for one’s offspring still remains the main descriptor of masculinity and fatherhood. An exploratory study conducted among absent fathers in the townships located in the city of Johannesburg revealed that men saw their roles as providers, at the exclusion of all other roles associated with fatherhood namely, parental motivation, nurturing, parental involvement and father’s influence on the child (Mazembo et al. 2013).

Fatherhood is a life altering experience which evokes feelings of authority and responsibility. Being unemployed and at the same time a juvenile, young people tend to deny paternity. While this is implausible, it is a reality in a country where the official unemployment rate stands at 29.8 percent, with a projected rate of 35.4 percent for men and 72 percent for those younger than 35 years of age (Statistics South Africa 2011; Mayer 2011). This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that those leaving the education system are ill-equipped with skills to compete in the labour market as only one in eight school leavers are being able to find a job (Seekings 2013).

A study in Ethiopia revealed that young men did not see themselves as being able to marry

due to its prohibitive costs which are compounded by Western practices of lavishness (Tadele 2006). In China, the parents of a young man have to build a house for the young couple prior to marriage and in low income families the groom to be assumes this responsibility (Woodward 2011). It is such conditions that render some men from taking responsibility for their children. Prohibitive costs of marriage and assuming responsibilities contribute to absent fatherhood.

The likelihood for teenage relationships to end in marriage is minimal because a number of factors militate against it. In the majority of cases where both parents are juveniles, young or unemployed, grandparents often take over the child care responsibilities, thus leading to the loss of parental power and influence over the child (Hall nd). According to Ritcher et al. (2012), the presence of non-parental adults in the household increases the lack of contact. Morwe (2002) also argues that some custodial parents deny the absent father access or contact with the child for various reasons such as not maintaining a child financially.

While studies have been done on single parenthood, the majority have focussed on the failures of the absent fathers rather than on their level of involvement. It is against this background that this study was initiated to assess the nature of involvement of the absent fathers in the lives of their children from the mothers’ experiences.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was quantitative in nature and a descriptive research design was used in order to establish the involvement of absent fathers in the lives of their children. The reason for using this design was to establish the level of involvement in the children’s lives from the perspective of the mothers. A sample of 54 single mothers was conveniently drawn from a number of mothers in the Odi region. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the respondents who agreed to participate in the study. They were all made aware of the purpose of the study and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and identity. Their participation was voluntary. Data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and presented using descriptive statistics.

FINDINGS

Table 1 gives the frequency distribution of the respondents' age, marital status and the age at onset of single parenthood. The majority of the respondents were over the age of 21; this included 20(30.7%) and 16(29.6) in the age groups of 22-31 years and 32-41 years respectively. Whilst the majority (n=32; 59.3%) of the respondents reported that they never married, only 4(7.4%) were widowed. As far as the age of being a single mother was concerned, almost half of the respondents (n=28; 51.9%) reported being in the 12-21 age group.

Table 1: Biographical profile

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<i>Age</i>		
12- 21	3	5.6
22- 31	20	30.7
32- 41	16	29.6
42+	15	27.8
Total	54	100
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Never married	32	59.3
Divorced	12	22.2
Separated	6	11.1
Widowed	4	7.4
Total	54	100
<i>Age at Onset of Single Parenthood</i>		
12-21	28	51.9
22-31	17	31.5
32-41	5	9.3
42+	4	7.4
Total	54	100

Responding to whether the children have contact with their absent fathers (Table 2), about two in five of the respondents (n=21; 38.9%) reported that absent fathers maintained contact whilst 11(20.4%) indicated that fathers refuse contact as against 9(16.7%) who reported that the father's whereabouts were unknown. On the question of monthly alimony, the majority of the respondents (n=29; 53.7%) as reflected in

the table reported that they did not receive any financial support from the fathers; and of those receiving, 12 (22.2%) reported receiving between R150.00 and R350.00.

Table 2: Contact between the absent father and child and alimony payments

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<i>Contact with the Absent Parent</i>		
Contact is maintained	21	38.9
Father refuses contact	11	20.4
Father's whereabouts unknown	9	16.7
Custodian refuses contact	7	12.9
Child does not want contact	2	3.4
Parent is deceased	4	7.4
Total	54	100
<i>Monthly Contribution</i>		
Nothing	29	53.7
R 150.00- R 350.00	12	22.2
R 351.00 – R 600.00	4	7.4
R 601.00 – R 900.00	3	5.6
R 901.00+	2	3.7
Not applicable	4	7.4
Total	54	100

Table 3 depicts the distribution of how consistent absent fathers were reported to be giving various types of support for the children. In their response 29(53.7%), 33(61.1%) and 32(59.3%) respondents reported that they did not receive financial support, emotional support and care giving respectively. However, only about 1 in 5 respondents (18.5-22.2%) indicated they had support regularly across all domains shown in the table.

DISCUSSION

More mothers than fathers always bear the brunt of child care and support. According to News24 (2013 and Weineck 2015: 66), 39 percent of children live with mothers and only 4 percent live with fathers. In the light of this, the study

Table 3: Consistency of maintenance by the absent fathers

<i>Area of support</i>	<i>Regularly</i>		<i>Irregularly</i>		<i>Not at all</i>		<i>Not applicable</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Financial support	10	18.5	11	20.4	29	53.7	4	7.4	54	100
Emotional support	10	18.5	7	12.9	33	61.1	4	7.4	54	100
Care giving	12	22.2	6	11.1	32	59.3	4	7.4	54	100

was undertaken to assess the role of absent fathers in the lives of children from single mothers' perspectives. In this study, whilst the majority (over 94%) of the respondents were over 21 years, about 3 in 5 respondents (59.3%) never married. This is consistent with the global trend where the majority of single parents are never married women as reported by (Nichols 2013). This has a lot of implications for single mothers. Alluding to this, Avison (1997) reported Dr. Lipman and his colleagues as establishing that single motherhood is associated with increased risk for affective disorder and poverty.

Though the majority of the respondents were over 21 years, over half (51.9%) of them started being single parents between the ages of 12 and 21 years. These findings are consistent with the report that the average age of mothers to have children is less than 30 years (Statistics South Africa 2012). In studies by Holborn and Eddy (2011) and also by Baxter (2014: 89) found that 44% of first born children were born to unmarried mothers. Some of these findings may have resulted from teenage pregnancies which often do not end up in marriages (Kyei 2012; Lloyd 2005). The reason for this is because patriarchy defines child care as a forte for the women thus absolving men from parental responsibilities.

In terms of maintaining contact with the absent fathers, only 38.9 percent of the children had any contact. Single parenthood robs the children of relations with their father's kin. This finding is at variance to that reported by SALDRU (2010) and Natalier and Hewitt (2015: 25) that 5 percent of the fathers had daily contact, 12 percent had several times a week whilst 25 percent had it several times a month. Frequent contact with children gives a sense of belonging and affection and the lack of it with a father is said to have adverse effects such as poor performance and or dropping out of school (Mazembo et al. 2013). In another study, it was reported that children who are exposed to single parenthood before the age of 16 years were likely to experience anxiety disorders from the ages of 21 to 25 years (Ferguson et al. 2007 and Reyell 2015: 82) though the context is important in this regard (Seekings 2013). This might be attributed to the general norm of allowing men to deny paternity, thus absolving them from parental responsibilities.

While it is often accepted that the fathers are responsible for the weak bonds with the chil-

dren, mothers cannot be exonerated either from such actions. In this study, 12.9 percent of the respondents reported that the absent father refused contact with the child. This might be a reflection of the nature of the parental relationship that could have conflict undertones which Swartz et al. (2013) describe as a relationship that is marred by irreconcilable differences.

In the study, more than half of the respondents reported not having any monthly contribution towards the upkeep of the child from the absent fathers whilst 22.2 percent received between R150.00 and R350.00. This implies that about 75 percent of the respondents either received nothing or too meagre to provide a decent livelihood for children. This is where absent fathers must be made to see that the needs of the child cuts across a range basic necessities such as food, shelter, education, health etc. On the flip side, non-supporting absent fathers can be caught up among the throng of unemployed people, in which case the youths are most affected (UN 2011). Therefore, the depiction of men as providers and bread winners can make them feel as failures in instances where they are unable to provide for their children through circumstances beyond their control (Brinker 2006; Reynolds 2015: 96).

A nurturing relationship is one where there is emotional support, which is characterised by open communication, offering comfort in times of distress and offering the child opportunities for self-development and independence. However, the study revealed that the fathers were hardly available for their children. Such absences prevent the formation of formidable father-child relationship and strong family bond. In the light of this, Swartz et al. (2013) argue that responsible fatherhood can have a positive impact on the children.

Single parent homes are often characterised by financial challenges that can be dire especially for mothers (Avison 1997; Fin24 2013). According to Ritcher et al. (2012), female households are likely to survive on remittances and if 40 percent of the children do not receive any paternal financial support during their first five years of life. The adequacy of finances is a crucial aspect in ensuring the livelihood of the children. This study revealed that only a handful of the fathers managed to contribute financially to the upkeep of their children. In their study, Mazembo et al. (2013) pointed out that the pres-

ence of the father greatly influences and enhances monthly spending of households where the father spends on an average of R 1000.00 per month in contrast to R 400.00 for those without.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that single mothers are under financial and social stress as the majority of absent fathers hardly maintained contact with their children. Besides this, about 3 out of 4 absent fathers either contribute nothing or less than R350.00 to the upkeep of their children. Furthermore, the study also revealed that about half of the single mothers became single parents at ages below 21 years. Generally, fathers seem to be a missing link in the lives of the children raised by single mothers and this is becoming a norm in the South African society. In the centre of all the drama of either being a single mother or absent father, the child remains at the mercy of both parents during the stages of development. This situation needs to be handled with caution and passion rather than not through garnishing court orders for maintenance or social grant hand-outs (child support grant) that is not sustainable in the long run.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the enthusiasm that some men have shown in the lives of their children needs to be encouraged and highlighted. This should be done through the media, public service and schools. Although the media is generally a proponent of gender equality and behaviour, parenting and care-giving have remained a woman's arena. This notion and mindset need to be changed through constructive engagement and education on parenting roles and responsibilities at schools and civic centres.

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