

Family Structure and Kins' Support as Determinants of Physical and Psychological Well Being of Widows

Jatinder K. Gulati*, Sonreet Kaur** and Shruti Sabharwal***

* & ***Deptt. of Human Development ** School of Business Studies, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana.

Abstract:- The present research examined the impact of family type, presence of an other male adult member in the family and Kins' support on the status of physical and psychological well being of widows. The study was based on a sample of 100 widows. Cornell Medical Index Health Questionnaire (CMIHQ) was used to assess their status of physical and psychological health problems and was applied as an indicator of stress. A self structured checklist to study the kin's tangible and emotional support, as perceived by the mothers was used. Results revealed high physical as well as psychological distress among these women. Though all the coefficients were non-significant, correlation analysis indicated that the presence of a male adult in the family was negatively correlated with physical, emotional and total distress of the mother. The differences in mean scores of women with male member present and absent indicated that emotional distress and total distress was higher among women who had a male adult present in the family. However, the mothers of female adolescents and not having any male person present in the family were emotionally less but physically more distressed with the presence of a male. Kin's emotional support reduced physical, psychological and total problems in single women, but tangible support increased their emotional and total stress though it improved their physical well being. Widows living in joint families were physically more stressed but they were psychologically slightly better than those living in nuclear families.

I. INTRODUCTION

Death or divorce is a traumatic life experience and it is a catalyst for a series of transitions in life, most of them being distressing (Kitson, 1992). The situation is stress laden and the family roles are in a state of flux. The experience of being single parent is different for men and women and differs with the cause of singlehood. Irrespective of the reason of single parenthood it becomes essential for the wife, not only to take care of herself but also her children. After the death of her husband, a widow while undergoing a process of emotional healing has to deal with the finances and the problems of child rearing. Besides financial hardships the widows have to face a 'role strain' as they have the full custody of the child. The mother has to act as a sole full-time parent in this family system, she has an increased responsibility of taking care of the child. The time, energy and money demands are very stressful on single mothers' families. Also, the mothers have to face the problem of unemployment, change in living arrangement and change in social relationship after the divorce or death of the spouse (Bharat, 1988a). Besides the anomalous responsibilities, a single mother has the added burden of social stigma, since single-mother family units are not easily accepted in a patriarchal society like ours. While acceptability is much higher for widows, people still don't know how to react if the woman is either divorced or separated from the husband. As reported by Singh and Gill in their study on widows (1986), single women faced financial, child rearing, personal and social problems. Taking care of children especially when sick, arranging weddings, purchasing items of luxury, maintaining "give and take" with friends, a lack of companionship, dressing soberly and running the entire household on their own were major problems experienced by the widows. Researchers have shown that death or separation of the spouse leads to distress among the single parent who has to care for the children as well as the other family responsibilities (McLanahan, 1983). Most single mothers might experience feelings of loneliness, frustration and inferiority complex, depression, insomnia, tendency to cry often, feelings of being fed up of life and general lack of self worth (Joshi and Bhatnagar, 1995). They feel insecure and sometimes become short tempered and lack an intimate companion. Feelings of being obliged to others, being overburdened by multiple family tasks and worries about the family's safety also upset the single mothers .

Although separation from the spouse as a result of death or divorce is a very traumatic experience for women, however the level of stress might vary from woman to woman. There has recently been an increased interest in the role of protective factors in people exposed to stressful experiences. Currently the available research on mental health emphasizes upon the buffering effects of protective factors that help in resisting against the negative effects of social stressors and making a person resilient (Compas, 1987; Rutter, 1987). The variable probably receiving the most research attention as a potential moderator of the impact of risk factors is

social support. It has been defined as the information leading the individual to believe that he or she is cared for, loved, esteemed and valued as a member of a net work of communication or a social group (Cobb, 1976). Social support can be available in the emotional or material form. There are several studies that demonstrate the role of social support for adults in the stress—distress association (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Kessler et al., 1985). This literature provides evidence that adults appear to cope better when they perceive they have social-support.

In the Indian settings social support has an important position. The social network systems in the Indian kinship system have been observed to be more intimate and reassuring as compared to those in the Western context, which might be by virtue of the differences in the family type and kinship system in two settings. Indian social support mainly comes from the extended or joint families. The extended / joint families, are an important segment of Indian social support system apart from comprising relatives, neighbors, peers and friends. But the situation might be different when a woman becomes single. She along with her children may gravitate to the care and shelter of her natal home or to the family of her parents and sometimes to her in-laws in case of death of her spouse. The kins particularly from in-laws sometimes detach themselves from their daughter-in-law, which might add to her stress. Even, living with the kins may be in parents' or in-laws' home, in joint families and in the absence of her husband might be a troublesome experience for a widow. However, if the kins are supportive and sincerely share her responsibilities they can protect her from the day to day hassles and undue stressors of life. The present research therefore strives to examine the role of family type and kins' support in reducing or adding to the stress of widows.

The other social problems faced by single mothers include turning down late night party invitations and a difficulty in finding company for social gatherings. They lack time for outside work and have to depend on others during emergencies. They have to depend upon others for "male oriented" works. It is thus assumed that the presence of an adult male member in the family might be able to reduce their stress. Therefore, the presence of an adult male in the family has also been included as a proposed protective factor in this study.

Although some work related to this area is already available but it has been done in western countries where the main cause of single parent families is divorce. Moreover, there is a vast difference between the social relationships that exists in Indian culture. It is therefore pertinent to undertake systematic study on widows covering the impact of type of family, the presence of other male members in the families and the availability of kins' support on the stress level of single women.

II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The materials and method used for conducting this research have been described under the following subheadings:

II.1 SAMPLE

The sample comprised of data set of 100 women who were widows and were aged between 30 to 45 years, had at least one adolescent child (between the age of 12-16years of age) and their family income ranged between Rs.5,000 to Rs.10,000. These women were selected through their adolescent children studying in ten randomly selected government high/senior secondary schools of Ludhiana city. The total sample of 100 single mothers included 50 mothers of adolescent boys and an 50 mothers of adolescent girls.

II.2 INSTRUMENTS USED

Cornell Medical Index Health Questionnaire (CMIHQ)

The Cornell Medical Index Health Questionnaire has been developed by Wig, Pershad and Verma (1983). This questionnaire was administered to assess the magnitude of physical and psychological stress among single mothers. It has 18 sections from A-R containing total number of 195 questions written in informal language. The inventory is divided into two sub-scales: **Physical Distress and Psychological Distress**

Kins' Support Checklist

A self structured checklist to study the Kin's Social Support, as perceived by the mothers was used. The checklist reflects two dimensions, of social support namely: Emotional support and monetary support rendered by the relatives and friends.

III. RESULTS

The results in Table 1 indicate that 36% of the respondents lived in joint families and the rest i.e. 64% were living in nuclear families. Data shows that 45% of the sample families were medium sized, 44% of them were small families having less than 4 members and 11% were large families having more than 8 members. In many of the families (52%) a male adult, like adult son, brother in law or father-in-law, was present whereas in 48% of the families there was no male adult present in the family.

i. RELATION WITH OTHER MEMBERS

Many of the women in this study (55%), had an average relationship with the other members of the family, while 30% assessed their relation with the members as poor and 15% of them found the relationship to be good (Table 1).

ii. KINSHIP SUPPORT

The table also shows that 61% of the widows reported that their relatives were emotionally supportive whereas 39% reported them to be non-supportive. It was observed that in most of the families (80%) the relatives did not provide any monetary support whereas 20% of the women received financial assistance in one or other form from the relatives. Therefore, kins' emotional support was available in higher extent than their financial support.

iii. STATUS OF WELL BEING OF WIDOWS

Table 2 shows the distribution of women into different levels of distress in the form of physical and psychological problems.

a) Physical Problems

Major proportion of the women were suffering from high physical ill health which was indicated through physical problems (50%), followed by moderate level (38%) and only 12% women were having low physical ill health.

b) Psychological stress

The data on emotional stress revealed similar results as that of physical stress. Majority of the women were holding high psychological stress (59%), while 33% were at moderate level and only 8% held low emotional stress.

c) Total stress

The overall view of total stress among single women shows high stress among them, 56% of them were highly stressed, 35% moderately stressed and only 9% having low stress.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents that though all the associations were non significant, yet living in joint family was positively correlated to the physical and total health problems among the women while emotional stress was negatively correlated with living in joint families. This indicated that the single women living in joint families were more physically distressed than those living alone with their children. But the women living in joint families were psychologically less distressed than those living in nuclear families.

Presence of a male adult in the family was negatively but non significantly correlated with physical, emotional and total distress of the mother. It shows that the presence of an adult in the family did not decrease the stress of the women considerably.

Both types of kinship support i.e. emotional as well as financial support available from relatives and friends was negatively correlated to both forms of maternal stress except for psychological stress and availability of financial support, though the results were not significant. As the financial support increased the physical and total stress decreased, but the psychological stress increased. Mirowsky and Ross (1989) reported that support, especially social support decreases depression, anxiety and other psychological problems.

iv. DIFFERENCES IN MATERNAL DISTRESS WITH PRESENCE / ABSENCE OF MALE ADULT MEMBER IN THE FAMILY

The results in Table 4 indicated that the physical distress among single women was higher when a male adult was present in the family as compared to those where an adult male was absent, though the differences in two groups of women were non significant. Similar results were observed for the emotional distress and total distress. The emotional distress and total distress was also higher among women who had a male adult present in the family. But these findings are contradictory to earlier research on a sample of US families (Kurdek 1991) where divorced individuals who lived without another adult were more depressed and reported lower levels of well being. Women were more likely to be depressed than men.

Kin's emotional support and mean scores of maternal distress

The data in table 5 suggests that women who had kin's emotional support available were significantly less physically ill as compared to their counterparts who did not have any kinship support available ($p < .10$).

Similar results were available for relation between kin's support and emotional distress among women. Single women who had kin's emotional support were significantly less psychologically stressed as compared to those who did not have any kind of support ($p < .10$). These results are in line with previous studies by Joshi and Bhatnagar (1995) who reported that support by other members in the family reduced women's psychological stress. The results for total distress were also similar to those of physical and emotional distress.

v. AVAILABILITY OF KIN'S FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND MATERNAL DISTRESS (MEAN SCORES)

The data in table 6 presents the mean scores for availability / non availability of financial support by kins and maternal distress. The results revealed that the women were more physically distressed if monetary support was not available, though the differences were non-significant. The results for emotional and total distress were contrary to the results of physical distress. The women had more emotional and total distress when they had monetary support from the kins. The t-value was found to be non-significant even for emotional and total distress. Bould (1977) also reported that the potential problem of female-headed families lies in their inadequacy in the area of the provider role. There is a relationship between the source of income of mother-headed families and personal fate control of the mothers. The mothers who fully assumed dual role and earned their own family support were better off in their fate control than the mothers who stayed at home and depended upon unreliable, unstable or stigmatizing sources of income like relatives and felt less able to plan for their own lives.

vi. FAMILY TYPE AND MATERNAL DISTRESS (MEAN SCORES)

Table 7 reveals that the widows living in joint family had significantly more physical problems as compared to their counterparts living in nuclear families ($P < .01$). Contrarily the psychological stress and total distress was slightly lower among those living in joint living than in nuclear families though the differences were not significant.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study aimed at exploring the magnitude of physical and psychological stress as manifested through their status of well being. It also examined the relationship between family structure, presence of another adult in the family and availability of social support from others. Results indicated that majority of the widow women were highly physically as well as psychologically distressed. Earlier studies have also reported that presence of a spouse improves physical health by encouraging and reinforcing protective behaviour. Marriage provides coherent, stable and regulated environment (Umberson, 1987). Kurdek (1991) has also reported that there is a positive relationship between well being and marital status. Married persons reported greater happiness and less depression than divorced counterparts.

Though all the coefficients were non-significant, correlation analysis indicated that the presence of a male adult in the family was negatively correlated with physical, emotional and total distress of the mother. The emotional distress and total distress was higher among women who had a male adult present in the family.

Kin's emotional support reduced physical, psychological and total stress in single women, but tangible support increased their emotional and total stress though it improved their physical well being. Widows living in joint families were physically more stressed but they were psychologically slightly better than those living in nuclear families.

Lorenz *et al* (1997) have documented their results on stress among divorced women and reported that there is significant relationship between divorce and psychological distress in adult women. They added that there were immediate and traumatic consequences of divorce on the family life of single mothers and on their psychological well being. Divorced mothers reported significantly higher levels of stressful life events and depressive symptoms, especially within the first few years after the divorce.

Similar results have also been given by Kessler (1979) who reported that single women are more vulnerable than others to stressful life events and common everyday strains because they have fewer social or personal resources with which to cope with the stressors.

Table 7 reveals that the widows living in joint family had significantly more physical problems as compared to their counterparts living in nuclear families ($P < .01$). Contrarily the psychological stress and total distress was slightly lower among those living in joint living than in nuclear families though the differences were not significant. This can be attributed to the help provided by the family members which reduces the women's distress. The findings are supported by the results of Joshi and Bhatnagar (1995) who suggested that staying in a joint family helps single parents by reducing their worries regarding finance, childcare and households.

It may be due to the fact that because of their dependency on others they have to work more but incur an inadequate which might be increasing the magnitude of stress among single women.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amato P. R. and Keith B. (1991). Parental divorce and well being of children : A meta analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110 : 26-46.
- [2] Bharat S. (1988a). Single parent families – consequences for single mothers. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 68 : 227-37.
- [3] Bould S (1977) Female headed families : Personal fate control and provider role. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 39 : 339-49.
- [4] Cobb, S. (1976). Social Support as a mediator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 38, 300-314.
- [5] Cohen S. S. & Wills T. A. (1985). Stress, social support and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98: 310-357.
- [6] Coleman S. J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 95-120.
- [7] Compas B.E. (1987). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 101: 393-403.
- [8] Joshi U. and Bhatnagar H. (1995). Single mothers. *Social Welfare*, 42 : 12-14.
- [9] Kessler C. R. (1979). A disaggregating of the relationship between socio-economic status and psychological distress. *American Sociological Review*, 47 : 752-64.
- [10] Kitson G. C. (1992). *Portrait of divorce : Adjustment to marital discord*. Guilford, New York.
- [11] McLanahan S. S. (1983). Family structure and stress : A longitudinal comparison of two-parent and female headed families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 45 : 347-57.
- [12] Lorenz F O, Simons R L and Cogner R D (1997) Married and recently divorced mothers' stressful events and distress : Tracing change across time. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63 : 810-21.
- [13] Mirowsky J. and Ross C. E. (1989). *Social causes of psychological distress*. Aldine-De Gruyter, New York.
- [14] Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanism. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57: 316-331.
- [15] Simons R. L., Johnson C., Lorenz F. O., Chao W., Beanman J., Conger R. D., Conger K. J., Whitbeck B. J., Goldberg E., Elder G. Hand Russell S.T.(1996) *Understanding differences between divorced and intact families*. pp 45-90. Sage Publications Inc, California.
- [16] Singh G M P and Gill S (1986) Problems of widowhood. *Ind J Soc Work* 67 : 67-71.
- [17] Umberson D. (1987). Family status and health behaviours : Social control as a dimension of social integration. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 28 : 306-19
- [18] Wig N. N., Pershad D. and Verma S. K. (1983). *Cornell Medical Index Health Questionnaire (CMIHQ)*. National Psychological Corporation, Agra.

Table 1: Percent distribution of widows according to level of physical, psychological and total stress

Type of stress	Level of stress	Range	n (%)
Physical stress		5-11	12 (12.00)
	Low	12-22	38 (38.00)
	Moderate	23-65	50 (50.00)
	High		
Psychological stress		7-10	8 (8.00)
	Low	11-17	33 (33.00)
	Moderate	18-31	59 (59.00)
	High		
Total distress	Low	21-24	9 (9.00)
	Moderate	25-38	35 (35.00)
	High	≥39	56 (56.00)

Figure in Parenthesis show percentages All X² values were found to be non-significant

Table 2 Distribution of sample on Family characteristics and availability of support

Characteristics	Category	F (%)
Family Type	Joint	36 (36.00)
	Nuclear	64 (64.00)

Male adult in the family	Present	52 (52.00)
	Absent	48 (48.00)
Relation with other members	Poor	30 (30.00)
	Average	55 (55.00)
	Good	15 (15.00)
Kin's support		
Emotional	Available	61 (61.00)
	Not available	39 (39.00)
Financial	Available	80 (80.00)
	Not available	20 (20.00)

Figure in parentheses show percentages

Table 3: Correlation of maternal stress with Kins' support, family type and presence of adult male in the family.

Socio-personal characteristics	Stress Variables		
	Physical distress	Emotional distress	Total distress
Living in Joint family	0.18	-0.008	0.004
Presence of male adult	0.030	0.016	0.034
Emotional Support available	-0.098	-0.034	-0.097
Financial Support available	-0.101	0.056	-0.110

Critical value of r at 0.05 is 0.196 and 0.01 is 0.257 Dummy variables: Support available : Not available = 0, Available = 1. Family type : Nuclear = 0, Joint = 1 and presence of male adult in the family : Absent = 0, Present = 1.

Table 4: Maternal distress (Mean±SD) as per Presence of male adult in the family

Male adult present	Physical Distress	Emotional Distress	Total Distress
Boys Present	28.00±14.57	19.92±5.03	47.92±16.09
Absent	24.32±13.32	18.60±5.24	42.92±15.85
t-value	0.93	0.91	1.11
Girls Present	24.61±13.19	18.30±6.14	42.91±17.52
Absent	28.41±11.12	17.47±4.36	45.38±13.68
t-value	1.09	0.54	0.66
Total Present	26.07±13.78	19.00±5.70	45.07±16.96
Absent	25.98±12.50	18.14±4.88	44.12±14.91
t-value	0.03	0.81	0.30

All t-values are non-significant

Table 5. Maternal distress (mean ± SD) as per availability of Kin's emotional support

Distress	Kin's emotional support		
	Available	Not available	t-value
Physical Distress	24.21±12.25	28.87±14.24	1.74*
Emotional Distress	17.87.21±5.46	19.85±5.04	1.82*
Total Distress	42.08±15.22	48.72±16.68	2.05**

* P<0.1 ** P<0.05

Table 6. Maternal distress (mean±SD) as per availability of Kin's financial support

Type of Distress	Kins' Financial support		
	Available	Not available	t-value
Physical Distress	25.40±14.59	26.19±12.91	0.24
Emotional Distress	19.75±6.38	18.36±5.08	1.04
Total Distress	45.15±18.32	44.55±15.57	0.15

Table 7. Maternal distress (mean±SD) as per type of family

Type of Distress	Family type		
	Joint	Nuclear	t-value
Physical Distress	28.94 ± 7.27	25.44 ± 6.82	2.40**
Emotional Distress	18.50 ± 6.82	19.10 ± 6.59	0.45
Total Distress	42.44 ± 6.80	41.90 ± 5.43	0.15

**p<.01.