

Original Paper

The Church and Single Parenting in Africa

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Abstract

Single parenting involves a sole parent who cares for children without the help of the other parent. The challenge of single parenting has negative effects on parents and the children alike. The death of a spouse, divorce, wars desertion, rape, sexual harassment and violent crisis are factors for this debacle. In such situation, the remaining parent not only inherits the responsibilities of the missing parent, but also takes custody of their children, in addition to his/her own roles as father or mother. Marriage ought to be imbibed as a standard for a godly society. Single parenting is not a thing to joke with or take with levity because of its scorching heat on both parents and children. Without mincing words, this phenomenon is eating deep into the African society; this makes the response of the Church logical. The study posits that it is important for African Christians to understand the biblical stance concerning marriage; so that intentional act of single parenting can be curbed.

Keywords

children, church, family, single parenting

1. Introduction

A single parent family is a nuclear family where one or more children are nurtured by either a father or a mother. (Note 1) Such a family is often referred to as father or mother headed family. (Note 2) There are several factors that are responsible for the increase in single parenting in our society, such as among others. (Note 3) It comes with a big financial burden that often drives the individuals into street hawking, armed robbery and their children in turn engage in prostitution just for survival and this poses a big challenge to the contemporary society.

This phenomenon has attracted the attention of theologians, feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers among other scholars. (Note 4) The first blessing God released upon man after he was created was to be fruitful, to multiply and to fill the earth (Gen, p. 1, p. 28). Marriage

is part of creative plan of God for the world and the family becomes one of the foundations of humans.” (Note 5) Procreation is God’s mandate to man; thus, children are seen as gifts of God. So the upbringing of the children should be the duty of parents. (Note 6) The family is the foundation of human society. (Note 7) A person becomes in the society is laid in the home and at the initial stage of life. (Note 8) Parents have important role to play in seeing to it that their children acquire the appropriate parenting. (Note 9)

In the contemporary African society are encountering challenges in terms of parenting. (Note 10) So, being a single parent in our society is a double task. Parents ought to be models, teachers and counselors. African system of raising children has changed a great deal, with the advent of industrialization and globalization.

Culturally, when an old man dies, 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 a woman who loses her husband can be inherited by her husband’s brother. The society would co-operate in ensuring that a widower re-marry. It did not matter if such a single parent was young or advanced in age. The community would do all it takes to get a wife for him with or without his co-operation. In any case, since polygamy was common and allowed in African society, to be a single parent was a rare phenomenon. (Note 11)

In Africa, the existence of single parenting was uncommon. Nowadays, it is a fast growing family pattern. (Note 12) The challenges of single parenting includes; bitterness towards the absent spouse, anger, loneliness, poverty and insecurity about raising children alone without a help. It is also unfortunate that some churches which are expected to provide succour to this set of people also fail in their responsibilities. The social stigma, financial hardship, shame and mockery single parents go through call for attention. The challenges of single parenting as mentioned above pose a big challenge African context. It is on this premise that this research explores the biblical perspective in search of a viable response of the Church.

2. Concept of Parenthood

Parenthood is a phenomenon that has always been in existence and is as old as mankind. A parent is one who births and nurtures a child. (Note 13) Although the common caregiver in parenting is the biological parents, others such as older sibling, grandparent, legal guardian or relatives also have their roles. (Note 14) Parenting practices around the world share three major goals: ensuring children’s health and safety, preparing children for life as productive adults, and transmitting cultural values. The word ‘parenting’, from its root, is more concerned with the activity of developing and educating of a child that who facilitates it. (Note 15)

The connotation of the word is that parenting is a positive, nurturing activity. (Note 16) It is within a family that a child learns the fundamentals of social interactions, behavior pattern and basic personality structure. (Note 17)

The family is the school of love and where children build character, virtues, norms and manners. The intellectual and moral development of the children depends on the education within the family. Social virtues, charity and justice, are basically taught in the family life. Ethically speaking, harmonious and successful families are built on moral and spiritual foundations. (Note 18)

Harris posits that the child's immediate environment starts from the family. (Note 19) The family is the child's non shared environment. Parenting involves providing care, support and love in a way that leads to a child's total development. (Note 20) Berger explains that parenting starts from conception, through birth, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. (Note 21) This means that parents are responsible for a child's physical needs, while creating a nurturing environment of attention, encouragement and love. Thus parenting involves meeting the child's physical, emotional and social needs. (Note 22)

Effective parenting is about nurturing, raising godly children and helping them discover and fulfill their purpose on earth. (Note 23) Parenting is not only about giving birth to a child but also working to ensure that the child becomes what God intends him or her to be on earth. Parenting is a huge task enormous, caring and protection, providing basic amenities of food, clothing, shelter, education and love, being around to support their children emotionally and to see that the inherent potential of the child is realized.

Just like Africans, every Jewish parent aspires to raise their children to be kind and responsible. In the Jewish Society, the father has a responsibility of teaching the male child the Pentateuch (Decalogue) before he gets to age of twelve. (Note 24) By so doing, the child's mind is built with the fear of Yahweh, the God of the Jewish patriarchs. In order to feed the family, the man work in the fields or at a village craft, while the women and children work to keep the home. (Note 25) The combination of the role of both mothers and fathers in the Jewish society was highly upheld in such a way that when their child misbehaves, the parents are blamed and even punished along with the child. (Note 26) This forms the bases on how God expects every parent to train their children. God's expectation is that both the father and mother should jointly train wards.

3. Concept of Single Parenting

Single-parenthood means one parent raising his/her child or children. The issue of single parenting is a universal phenomenon that calls for attention. (Note 27) Single parenting whether rich or poor, old or young, passes through similar problem. (Note 28) They are confronted with agony of life as they experience psychological, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual problems; although it may be higher in some countries and regions. (Note 29)

Globally one-quarter to one-third of all families are headed by single mothers. United States has the highest percentage of single-parent families (34% in 1998) among developed countries, followed by Canada (22%), Australia (20%), and Denmark (19%). (Note 30) In developing countries, divorce, desertion, death, and imprisonment result into single-parent families which primarily are headed by women. Divorce rates vary from country to country, from a low of less than 5 percent in Kuwait to a

high of over 40 percent in Botswana and Barbados. (Note 31) In countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Tobago more than 25 percent of households are headed by women. (Note 32)

Single-parent families have a negative impact on children simply because they do not have a nuclear family structure. It is often considered an aberration, which lacks the capacity to produce a psychologically balanced offspring. (Note 33) The households are deficient in some critical ways for effective child training. (Note 34) Causal factors of single-parenting are often situational; even traumatic (in that they stem from divorce, death, or imprisonment), while some are not. (Note 35)

Single parents can be young girls who have pregnancy at tender age, women who want a child but not a partner, a parent deserted or divorced by a spouse, widows or widowers left to care for young children. Sometimes a person becomes a single parent because of the other partner's inability, physical or mental, to share in caring for the children. (Note 36)

Hunter views a single parent as someone who has unshared responsibility for the care and direction of the children. (Note 37) Thus, a single parent is someone who lives in a separate household with his or her child and who has no partner to share responsibilities. The sanctioning of the single parent makes the other spouse invisible.

Bergman considers single parenting as a situation where a woman, for instance, decides to have and nurture a child on her own, remaining unmarried. (Note 38) Thus, single parenting does not necessarily come as a result of divorce or death but some individuals may decide on their own to raise children without getting married. (Note 39) This stance is not common in Africa, considering the fact that the society cherishes people who stay glued to their marriage. (Note 40)

Much of the debate over single parenting focuses on how these trends affect children. The sociological evidence shows conclusively that children suffer when they grow up in any family situation other than an intact two-parent family formed by their biological father and mother who are married to each other." (Note 41) Single parenting does not only affect the children involved but also the society, which must pay the costs for increased crime, disease, poverty, and other forms of societal breakdown. (Note 42) Blankenhorne posits that fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend, driving most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women." (Note 43)

While most people agree that children are better off in families with two parents as long as both parents are non-abusive, many argue that the adverse effects of single parenting on children have been exaggerated. (Note 44) In their opinion, single parenting establish strong bond between parents and children. (Note 45) Also, lack of parental conflict in single parenting gives children a relaxed atmosphere. Children of single parents mature early than children from intact homes. Children from single parents exceptionally achieve in their academic endeavours since the goal of single-parent family is raising a child who is free from undue anxiety to play and learn.

The fact that single parenting is purse sapping and energy consuming cannot be denied. In spite of

whatever reasons, the challenges are seriously enormous on the parent and children. The ideal is that both parents take a share in raising children, but they assume different roles. The children from single parent families grow up to understand that life without a father or mother is somewhat incomplete and different from life in the intact family. They miss the love, care and model of a family enjoyed where the family shares together in love. There is nothing as good as parents being together with their children sharing daily in the good atmosphere of love and understanding each other.

4. Africans and Single Parenting

Single parenting in African societies is viewed as a curse rather than a blessing; it is often attributed to ill luck, spell or witchcraft especially when the husband passes on at an early age. In present day African societies, a single mother is prepared for several uncomfortable situations, or disapproving comments from strangers, co-workers and family members. Many times a woman living alone is seen as loose. There are many traditional pressures on widows in Africa which subject them to a life time of discrimination. The lack of care has reduced the single parent to a lower status in the society. (Note 46) For example in Yoruba land, widow is restricted of movement for a certain period. The Yoruba tradition puts the widows in a conferment for the first three months to mourn their husbands. The widows are forbidden to go out in the day time except at night and must be escorted by a member of the family. Also, the only dress suitable for the widows during mourning period is a black or dark blue without any serious make-up. She must not dress or look beautiful or else she will be accused of killing her husband. Shaving of head is another traditional pressure experienced by the widows to inform people that the woman is a widow and this will earn her not only recognition but sympathy as well. (Note 47)

In some African communities, the widow is married off to the husband's brother especially if she still young irrespective of her feeling. If she refuses to remarry one of the family members, she is driven out of the house and at same time is left alone to shoulder the burden of the children. If eventually the widow remarries from the same family, she is forced to readjust. She becomes one of the several wives of the new husband. She, who was used to nuclear family life style, would now be forced into polygamous family with challenges like fighting, quarrelling, pettiness, envy and jealousy. (Note 48)

Another unfair treatment to single parent families by the society is the problem of widow disinheritance which is prevalent anywhere in Nigeria. Single women suffer property grabbing from the hands of their late husband's relatives. The assets the husband and wife struggled to acquired, when the man eventually dies, family members who are greedy, heartlessly take everything and leaves the widow and her children with nothing.

5. Biblical View on Single Parenting

Single parenting is not only practiced today, it was practiced in the Bible. From the beginning God's plan was that there should be two parents (Gen 1:27). God never intended single parents, just like he never intended sexual immorality, divorce and death. (Note 49) Rather, single parenting came into the

world after the fall of man, which was a direct result of man's sin and disobedience. Many biblical passages point out the challenges of single parents, how they should be helped and how neighbours should relate with them. (Note 50) Thompson pointed out that the protection of the weak in the Old Testament (Ps.72:12-14) did not rest totally on the kings alone (Note 51)

The story of Hagar in Genesis marked the beginning of single parenting in the Bible. This story is about Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, Sarai's servant. Sarai offered her to Abram her husband so that she could bear her a son (Gen 21:1-20). (Note 52) It was customary during the days of the Patriarchs for a barren woman to procure a surrogate wife, a maidservant, or a next of kin and present her to her husband. It was apparently acceptable within the social custom in the ancient near-east in those days. (Note 53) Hagar bore a son for Abram but he was not the promised child. Hagar became the first single parent in the Bible after her injection. By this time Hagar had to raise the child alone. She was frustrated and hopeless considering the load of being a single parent. God's concern for Hagar in her distress forms the background of God's expectation on how people of God should treat single parent families. (Note 54)

Widows fall into the category of single parenting in the Old Testament. Widows face several challenges because of the responsibility of providing for their children. Widowhood is not a desirable experience. Widows often face financial struggles (2 Kgs 4:11), they were among the most helpless in the society (Deut 10:18, Isaiah 54:4). (Note 55) Some widows sought to remain unmarried while others remarried (Ruth 4:10:13). For widows who could not remarry, God made certain special provisions for them (Deut 25:5-6) and the childless widows from priestly families could return to their father's household and partake of the priestly food (Lev 22:13).

The oppression of widows attracts God's wrath (Ps. 94:6; Mal. 3:5). (Note 56) Laurin, in his comment on the subject on widows says: "It portrays the idea of helplessness and neediness which translate to someone who is unable to protect or provide for herself. Therefore the Law of Moses enjoins special consideration and justice for the widow along with the orphan and for those who do otherwise, God's punishment would abide with them." (Note 57) It is mandatory that the farmers must remember widows during the harvest. (Note 58) A typical example is Naomi and Ruth, (single mothers) when Ruth was sent to glean in Boaz's field (Ruth2:3). (Note 59)

Also, God's love and care for the destitute was seen in Jesus' ministry. The way Jesus handled the issue of widows shows that God is still interested in care of single parents. (Note 60) This is part of the reasons Jesus is often at loggerhead with the religious leaders of his time (Matt. 23 14; Mk. 12:40). (Note 61) A lot of single parent have become prey of the "so called men of God" in African society under the pretext of religion. Some religious leaders instead of providing succor to single parent families add more sorrow. Jesus' ministry to the widow of Nain is a model of Church response to single parenting. (Note 62) It is not necessary that it takes the same form but it can be applied to meet the needs of the single parent in the contemporary African Church.

Jesus' teaching towards recognition of widows is practical in the early church. Acts 6 explains the step

of the Apostles to effectively minister to the needs of widows. They had a distinct group of women called “widows” dedicated to prayer and intercession. (Note 63) Also, widows in some churches were engaged in charitable works such as hospitality and working at wool to assist those in distress. (Note 64) Clear enough, widows in the early church were active in the body of Christ, communicating the love of Christ by deeds of mercy and hospitality. (Note 65)

The early church did not discriminate against single women, but accepted them and guided them to live a holy life. (Note 66) The mandate of the church is to train all its members to fear the Lord and to live right. The church should accommodate both the married and single parents and as well promote fellowship among them. Single parents should be taught to understand that God loves them unconditionally. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world...” (Jam 1:27). James is prescribing nothing new for the church; caring for orphans and single parents should be a ministry of the African church today. Any practice of Christianity that does not exhibit this concern is deceptive and worthless. (Note 67)

6. Challenges of Single Parenting in Africa

The challenge of single parenting is a serious one on both the parents and wards. A single parent faces doubled responsibilities requiring time, attention and money. According to Berns, single-parent family is the primary cause of school failure and problems of delinquency, drug use, teenage pregnancies, poverty, and welfare dependence. Research shows that high proportion of children from single parent families perform very poorly on math in schools. (Note 68) Less attention is often paid to the psychological well-being of the children. Children from single parent homes are commonly described as more hostile, aggressive, anxious, fearful and hyperactive. (Note 69)

Parents are primarily responsible for the educational and career development of their children. Literatures on academic performance among children suggest that children’s academic performance improve when both parents are actively involved in their education. Both parents are more likely to involve in their children’s education than single parents. (Note 70) The family lays the foundation of education before the child goes to school and the personality that the child takes to school is determined by the home.

The child’s physical appearance, his abilities and parental involvement in things he does well are other factors involved in the development of healthy self-esteem. Environments also affect a child’s self-esteem. When the parents separate, the child loses a part of his self-esteem support system. (Note 71) They may crave for affections, which they will not get enough because of the parent’s busy schedule. Children from single parent families often do not get the affection they need. They do not enjoy complete parental love and care. They feel inferior, rejected, unwanted, and unsuccessful in the midst of other children.

Since the children cannot get what they want; anger is a way to deal with frustration. Their anger may

be towards the parents or even at God. Majority of them will be angry with everyone and everything. (Note 72) It is believed that girls in single parent families are at greater risk for early involvement in sexuality, teenage marriage, teenage pregnancy, rape, non-marital birth and divorce than girls in two parent families. This is possible because of lack of enough resources from single parents to meet the needs of their children. Adult children from single parent families have a more difficult time achieving intimacy and forming a stable marriage. Those who do marry are much more likely to divorce. (Note 73)

Single parenting also has effects in the lives of parents. Single parenting increases responsibility and makes life uninteresting for those involved. Most single parents work long hours to meet the financial needs of the family. Financial constraint can lead to single parents to depression as a result of constant thinking and social exclusion. Children may thus not be able to take the opportunities they always dreamt of due to financial concerns. (Note 74) Depression experience by single parents can be chronic to the extent that they develop abnormal illness especially when it emanates from the death of either of the parents. (Note 75)

In Africa, many single mothers especially widows are confronted with the problem of seizure of their diseased husband's property. They experience frustrating, degrading and dehumanizing crisis. Sometimes the widow and her children may be kicked out of the house and the property taken over by family members. Some traditions willed every valuable property to the relatives as soon as the husband dies. The widow is left with the children's clothes and a few things considered not useful to the family. This tradition of inheritance and asset sharing does not put into consideration the role played by the woman in the accumulation of the property left behind by the deceased husband.

In Africa, men are most the breadwinners of the house. Most African women are completely house wives without any education or job. So, a lot of single parents left with poverty after death, divorce, desertion or any reason responsible for being a single parent. The problem of illiteracy, lack of education and training contributes to the poverty of single parents in Africa. This is why some single mothers abandon their wards with their parents in the village and run to urban areas to do menial jobs.

7. Conclusion

Parenting is a collective responsibility of both the father and mother in raising children. Single parenting is never the plan of God for mankind. It is never supported nor has its base in the Bible. The parents must unite together in training their children for the good of the family and society. The menace of single parenting is a threat to Christian faith in Africa. Many single parents in African today are not as a result of death. Meanwhile, discrimination against single parents continues in the African contemporary society. This is so probably because the church is not intensifying enough to combat the ungodly pressures against the belief of the church.

In Africa, any church that does not develop ministry to single parenting is certainly not following the examples of Jesus and early church. God is very clear in His concern and love for single parents and

their children. The church remains the only fellowship where true love, care and a sense of belonging can be given to single parents and their children. For effective and satisfactory church ministry to single parent homes, the study recommends the following:

- (a) Churches in Africa should teach sound biblical understanding of marriage. To avoid persistent marital conflicts which may lead to divorce, pastors need to prepare the intending couples for marriage and not wedding and also programmes that will foster better relationship.
- (b) Marriage and sanctity of the marital vows should be well taught to help to put a check on the excess of divorce which gives birth to single parenting.
- (d) African Churches should have proper consideration for single parents. Pastors and Church leaders should adequately teach members concerning the importance of will writing, which relatives of the deceased often takes advantage.
- (e) Churches should help victims of divorce through reconciliation. Couples should be encouraged to forgive each other regardless of what have transpired.
- (h) Churches in Africa should have a standard vocational training centre to empower single parents. This can also be extended to single parents outside the church.
- (i) Children of single parents should be given the needed encouragement. They should be allowed to talk freely about their problems, feelings and fears.

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