

PERTINENT ILLS CONCOMITANT WITH MATRIFOCALITY IN ZIMBABWE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

ITAI MAFA^{1,2}

¹Department of Social Work and Social Development, University of Fort Hare, P. Bag X1314, Alice, South Africa. ²School of Social Work, Midlands State University, Corner Chinhoyi and Grant Street, Harare, Zimbabwe. Email: itaimafa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The paper explored the challenges underpinning matrifocality in Zimbabwe, what is normally termed single motherhood. With the marital institution losing eminence in Africa due to a myriad of factors such as globalization, industrialization, and eurocentrism; this has greatly altered today's family structure. The study was anchored on the realization that the traditional composition of an African family which recognized extended families has now been overshadowed by the surfacing of nuclear families as well as an increase in matrifocal families.

Methods: The article utilized a qualitative approach and a case study design. Convenience sampling was used to select 16 single mothers and a purposive sampling method was preferred to sample three key informants. For single mothers, in a mini-depth interviews were used to elicit detailed information and focus group discussion was adopted for key informants. Data were analyzed using the thematic process to integrate the findings.

Results: Stress-induced pathologies, relational conflict within the family set-up, economic privations, communal cynicism, and ostracism were identified as challenges compromising the development and stability of matrifocal families in Chiredzi district.

Conclusions: Guided by various feminism lenses and the ecological perspective, the article shifts from the pathological view to single motherhood, advocating for the need to focus the dialogue along the challenges faced by matrifocal families in an attempt to recommend interventions that can strengthen this family set-up.

Key words: Matrifocality, Challenges, Development, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Matrifocality, a single-mother-headed family which was once regarded as uncommon and acceptable only in exceptional cases has now been widely embraced as a normal family structure [1-3]. Oberiri and Dogari [4] and Madankar [5] argue that the African culture has been eroded as westernization and globalization have diluted the marital eminence leading to increase matrifocality. With increased industrialization, migration, and globalization, cultural fusion may have contributed to the alterations of the composition and structure of the family. Conventionally, a family in Africa composed of a father and a mother with the acknowledgement of the extended family and its significant role [1]. Nowadays, the traditional family which emphasized on communal socialization has been largely overshadowed by the preference of the nuclear family set-up. Homosexual marriages, open marriages, "small houses" [6], and matrifocal families [7] have also been increasingly normalized, indicating an adoption of diversified family composition structures.

While the structural functionalists, conflict theorists and social deviancy theorists explain matrifocality as a threat to a normal family structure [8], this view may be criticized for its pathological and punitive approach. Libertarian feminists therefore forward that the marriage institution is oppressive and therefore single motherhood should be acknowledged as any normal family structure [9]. Even though single-mother families face a wide spectrum of difficulties, an overemphasis on their vulnerability can be ideologically and cogently misleading as these households are capable of self-sufficiency with or without external assistance. The outright pathological view to single motherhood is therefore problematic and anti-developmental as it lacks empirical validation. However, common characteristics among matrifocal families around the globe are their susceptibility to

poverty, child behavioral issues, health challenges, and generally lower standards of living [2,10,11]. Stack and Meredith [12] and Keswet and Dapas [13] in concurrence found out that matrifocality is a daunting experience as it is associated with the phenomena of feminization of poverty [14], feminization of HIV/AIDS [15], and feminization of unemployment [16]. Furthermore, through the survival analysis techniques, single motherhood can have critical implications for children's welfare; hence, child poverty which has adverse implications on the welfare of children. This validates this paper's position to explore the challenges faced by single mothers to make a discourse on how to empower this family structure.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research approach and design

A qualitative approach was used for the current paper with the preference of a case study research design. This approach was chosen because its techniques allowed for the case-by-case exploration of the challenges surrounding matrifocality.

Data collection methods and instruments

The article employed face to face in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion method. These methods were preferred as they allowed for clarification through follow-up questions and probing. An interview guide and a focus group discussion guide, with pre-outlined questions were used to facilitate individual interviews and a mini-focus group discussion, respectively. Questions for individual interviews were direct questions regarding single mothers' experiences while those for the focus groups discussion were structured in a third-party format to elicit the experts' points of view. An audio recorder was used to capture and store data before the translation and transcription of the responses from the interviewees and focus group discussants.

Sampling methods and unit of analysis

Non-probabilistic sampling techniques were used for the current study. A convenient sampling technique was used for single mothers in accordance to the participants' availability while a purposive sampling method was used to select key informants, choosing participants with the required knowledge needed to satisfy the research questions. The three key informants, one key informant from each of the following: The Ministry of Social Welfare (government), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), and the Faith-based Organizations were specifically chosen as they possessed requisite expert information regarding the challenges faced by single mothers in Chiredzi. These organizations are the frontrunners in social welfare issues, especially food insecurity and mental health challenges. The sample for the study was 19 (16 single mothers and three key informants) as guided by the principle of point of data saturation.

Ethical considerations

The study honored the ethics of legality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality to satisfy the requirements of a scientific research. Ethical clearance was also given by the Faculty Research Board at the University of Fort Hare. Ethical considerations are crucial when dealing with human beings as this ensures that participants are cushioned from exploitation.

Data analysis

The paper adopted the thematic analysis and coding whereby rich raw data were broken down into their component parts and these parts were given labels. The data were arranged in themes and sub-themes according to the research questions. This was done through familiarization with data leading to generation of patterned themes across the dataset. Thematic data analysis was preferred because it enabled the provision of rich and detailed information of the cases within the case study design. The methodology also allows data to be analyzed in its naturalistic state including non-verbal cues.

Theoretical framework

The paper was guided by the ecological systems theory to reflect on the layered challenges associated with matrifocality. The perspective is discussed below:

The ecological systems theory

The ecological system theory propounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 has been used for this paper to give a holistic philosophical outlook regarding the challenges surrounding matrifocal families. The theory helps to understand the plight of single mothers from different proximal systemic processes in societies [17]. This means that the challenges faced by single mothers are better understood when viewed from various levels of the ecological systems. Bronfenbrenner [18] submits five progressive levels which are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macro-system, and the chronosystem. These levels have the potential to influence single motherhood either negatively or positively as proximal processes, personal characteristics, context, and time interplay. While the microsystem is the immediate environment which influences single mothers directly, the mesosystem encompasses the relationships between and among microsystems surrounding single mothers [19]. Single mothers' interaction with family and neighbors may determine the outcome of their experiences and the challenges they face. Of importance also is the macrosystem which relates to the economic, cultural, and social setting where single mothers reside in. These external factors may either lighten or exacerbate single mothers' lone burden of child bearing and caregiving for their children.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the lenses of an ecological systems theory, the findings for this paper were linked to social work practice to extrapolate them to future research and policy recommendations. The study revealed that single mothers faced an array of challenges emanating from their interaction

with the immediate environment, their families, communities, and the macrosystem that surrounds them. These have been discussed in detail below:

Stress-induced challenges

The findings revealed that mental health issues were a major challenge among single mothers. Regarding such health challenges, the study showed that some ailments such as blood pressure were triggered by high levels of stress and difficulties that are concomitant with lone child care and the sociocultural stigma experienced by single mothers. Economic challenges related to the payment of school fees and food insecurity issues were also cited as contributory factors to the mental health challenges. The need for single mothers to meet the needs of their children pushed them to sell sex even when they are emotionally and physically drained.

So it is very stressful worrying over how I should make ends meet especially because I have a 4 year old child who is also HIV positive. I keep thinking how will I feed her if I stop selling sex because there is no father to support financially. Except if I go to the bar, where else can I get it (the sex to get the money)? I have to work for my children even and. I have contracted HIV while looking for money. I am 50 years old now and my body is in pain and I have stress every day thinking...Because of stress, I take pills for BP besides the pills (antiretroviral) (Single mother 9)

I remember it (the blood pressure) started when my husband died, I was left with two small kids. I had no job and I didn't know what I was going to give those children. So I was thinking a lot. I was always depressed and that's when I developed BP (high blood pressure) early in life. So even now, I have times when I am just low and anxious because I can't help but to think about my children's future...(Single mother 11)

We have a group of single mothers who meet here on Tuesdays and I know that some of them are HIV positive. Some also have different ailments such as BP and sugar (diabetes). But I think some of these challenges come from stress; having to worry about their children, rent and even stress caused by the death of the husband or being divorced or rejected. We offer them counselling, but not all of them come. You know in Africa, people don't believe so much in telling strangers about your issues...(Key Informant 3)

The findings depict that even though mental health issues such as high blood pressure, anxiety, and distress are universal to humanity, due to their distinct status, circumstances associated with single mothers can trigger stress-related illnesses. Furthermore, abnormal grief and inability to cope with life's challenges as revealed in the study has the potential to cause psychosocial problems such as depression and anxiety. Although psychological disorders can have multi-factorial etiologies, the mental illnesses mentioned by single mothers can be traced to the everyday hustles that single mothers struggle with to provide for their children and for themselves. The findings also suggest a gendered economic disadvantage for single mothers where their lone childcare responsibility naturally puts pressure on them to cater for the welfare of their children. For low income women, this can be a confounding source of stress which may trigger mental health and stress-related challenges, especially considering Zimbabwe's current economic situation. In concurrence with these findings, Stevenson *et al.* [20] indicate that factors such as the death of a partner, divorce cases and custody battles can be traumatizing such that women are exposed to a constellation of psychosocial challenges. These findings are also consistent with those of Curtis [18] and Garner and Peterson [21] who confirmed that single mothers undergo stressful challenges that make them susceptible to psychosocial and mental health problems. Besides their maternal responsibility of childcare, single mothers suffering from stress-related illnesses may find it difficult to secure a job, compromising the welfare and educational prospects of their children. These findings further resonate with those of Kalil *et al.* [22] whose logistic regression analysis predicted that the likelihood of securing a job was 4 times lower for single mothers with mental challenges. This may be attributed to the lack of confidence and assertiveness which may be displayed by mental health sufferers.

Relational conflict within families

While the family is normally applauded for being supportive, understanding and caring; findings from the study revealed that some families are judgmental, critical, and difficult when dealing with single mothers. Some of the single mothers wailed their disappointment on how their families had judged and alienated them from important decisions simply because of their marital status; yet still, some not by choice but due to circumstances beyond their control. The findings further revealed that some families may judge single mothers based on the behavior of their children. Among those interviewed, one single mother explained that being a single mother is associated with a stigma of failure in every facet of life.

Whatever you are doing, the family will say you don't have a husband so what good can you do because you have failed to get married. So whatever you do you are a failure. They say we are "returned soldiers," (meaning someone who has failed to keep their marriages and have returned home) so what good can we do? (Single mother 5)

They (in-laws) can even accuse you of killing your husband. They just find a way of accusing you. Some were saying I had boyfriends and they killed him. That's their way of justifying why they are taking away the properties your husband would have left... (Single mother 12)

For me my worry is about my children. On one hand, I have to explain to the child, especially a boy where his father is. When they are still young, you can lie but as they grow older it's a problem. They start misbehaving and you wonder what you can do. My eldest child 17, I know she has also started going to the bar (selling sex) like me to raise her fees. I know it's wrong and they don't understand that I am doing this for them so that they can have a better future. But, she doesn't listen to me... The family will find a way of mocking me because of how my daughter has turned out to be... I am considered a failure.... (Single mother 7)

Yes families can be supportive while others can be very difficult. It just depends with the family. We handle different cases of single mothers that tell us how their in-laws abuse them when their husbands die. Even within one's family, those who are married for example may look down upon the one who is a single mother. And of course we offer counselling and assistance to these single mothers because it can be stressful... (Key Informant 3)

The verbatim shows how some families regard marriage as the standard for success, such that if someone is not married or chooses to leave their marriage, they are regarded as an outright failure in all aspects of life. This shows a culture of stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of marital status as other families may regard marriage as the only credible indicator of success. Such a view fails to acknowledge that some women leave their marriages due to gender-based violence and other irreconcilable differences within marriages. These findings on an overemphasis on marriage are consistent with those of Okiya [23] and Mapuranga [24] who noted that the marriage institution is the most celebrated ritual in the African culture, thereby justifying why some families may disregard single mothers. The politics of marriage as a gendered phenomenon are therefore revealed as such discrimination and maltreatment may not be experienced by men who dissolve their marriages. Families as primary agents of socialization are very instrumental in enforcing norms and values. The manner in which single mothers are treated within their families therefore has implications on how the society views them. A lack of moral support especially from the family may either trigger or precipitate psychological illnesses indicated in the first theme. This is evidence that the dynamics associated with matrifocality are multi-faceted and layered as supported by the ecological perspective [18]. A form of catharsis within family structures where the widow's in-laws torment their daughter-in-law through accusations in order perhaps to confiscate their properties was also revealed in this study. In agreement, Bhatasara [15] reveals that some widows in Zimbabwe are disposed of their property such as land as their in-laws accuse them of witchcraft or killing their own husbands. Such maltreatment reinforced through an African sociocultural configuration may be a barrier to self-sufficiency and self-development as it may further weaken single mothers' coping agency. Another form of familial

challenges also emerged in the quotes above where single mothers revealed the burden of being a bi-parent especially in disciplinary and behavioral issues. Bibliaz and Gottainer [11] and Kalil *et al.* [12] concur that many single mothers face difficulties in disciplining their children for wholesome behavior. The patriarchal culture in Zimbabwe which seems to incline toward a paternalistic disciplinary discourse may pose disciplinary issues and gaps in matrifocal families due to the absence of a father-figure.

Communal ostracism and cynicism

The findings further showed that the society to a larger extent generally looks down upon single mothers. Almost all of the single mothers howled that their communities viewed them as outcasts with compromised moral standards. The research findings additionally revealed that these ill-treatments come from the church members, neighbors, and especially from fellow women who have husbands. Societal members, especially married women, assume that all single mothers (despite age or the circumstances leading to lone motherhood) are loose, dissipated husband snatchers.

The community rejects you simply because you are a single mother. It doesn't matter if your husband died or you were divorced. For them you are nothing. Whatever you are doing does not look like a good thing. It's nothing no matter how good it is (Single mother 4)

Married women think we take their husbands everywhere we go. Even if you get money they are there to criticize thinking you slept with someone's husband. Even if you wear fashionable clothes, they think their husbands or other men have bought things for us or we are wearing those clothes to be seen by their husbands. For them we can do anything with anybody because we need money... (Single mother 9)

With single mothers; one, males in the community see them as sex objects who can sleep with anyone. There is a perception that they are desperate and they can't refuse any man's advances because they have children anyway. So, many men see single mothers as weak in terms of morality. Two, people who are married, when they see them walking with a man, they think they are taking their husbands... (Key informant 1)

While the community may be a place of support and solace, the findings showed that for single mothers in Chiredzi Town, the community viewed them with intense suspicion, labeling, and adamant rejection. The findings also suggested that communities linked single motherhood to prostitution and loose morals. Single mothers may be seen as potential sex workers and "husband snatchers" as the society understand their financial vulnerability. The power of public opinion is therefore highlighted as it shows how communities construct acceptable behavior in accordance with neighborhood relationships and gender expectations. Single mothers may be perceived as breaching the moral order hence their exclusion as communal misfits. Custodians of morality in communities may be responsible for such moral assessments which may result in cultural and societal stigma. This may be traced to the African culture which appears to submit that any woman needs validation of her worth through marriage, lest her relevance be questioned. Single parenthood therefore becomes a gendered phenomenon because communities ridicule women who are raising children on their own, whether by choice or due to factors beyond their control. These findings are similar to Kotwal and Prabhakar [25] who reveal that some single mothers end up avoiding social gatherings to evade the ridicule and embarrassment within their communities. It can be noted that communities are sometimes concerned with judging the morality of single mothers without appreciating their bravery and commitment as they carry the saddle of raising children alone. Advocacy to sensitize communities on the implications of gender biases that pathologizes single motherhood are necessary to bring an attitudinal shift which is receptive and supportive of single motherhood. Accommodating them is essential for their inclusion in accessing economic opportunities, respect, and support within their communities as this has a bearing on the quality of their lives and that of their children.

Economic challenges

The findings showed that all the lone mothers bewailed over the insufficiency of funds to cater for the needs of their children. All of them indicated that payment of their children's school fees, rentals, and buying of basic necessities was a challenge for them. The focus group panel also emphasized on the economic challenges that are affecting single mothers. They all agreed that their organizations receive problems from single mothers on a daily basis that is reflective of the insufficiency of financial resources. The key informants indicated that single mothers were struggling to pay for medical bills, fees, rentals and to buy food for themselves and their children.

Some things I may try but I fail because I am all alone. Everything is waiting for me and me alone. From food, clothes rent and school fee is a problem. Drama with family and loneliness I can deal with, but at the end of the day children have to eat and go to school... (Single mother 8)

I will not lie to you, it's hard being a single mother. You have to make sure that everything is in order for your child. You have to look for money so that they can eat and go to school. The school fees is expensive, everything is just expensive in general. What I am getting from my job is not enough compared to the expenses that I should pay for. We don't know where this economy is going... (Single mother 7)

Among the most prevalent challenges are food insecurity, problems in payment of school fees and medical bills. When we follow-up on children who are struggling to pay for school fees, most of those children with outstanding fees are from single mothers. You have to understand that Chiredzi residents have not recovered from the retrenchments that occurred in Hippo Valley Estate and Triangle plantations, (the companies employing the majority of Chiredzi's population) as a result of the Land Grab policy (an exercise where farms were forcefully taken from white farmers by the Zimbabwean government). There is no work here especially for these women who worked in farms because many of them have low levels of education. This makes the statutory intervention difficult because they don't know how to budget and prioritise things, compromising the management and sustainability of the projects that are initiated on their behalf by organizations such as Family Aid Care Trust (FACT). Some single mothers misuse the funds that are meant for projects to personal use and this makes it hard for NGOs to employ statutory interventions. That's why they end up in financial problems again... (Key informant 2)

Even though all Zimbabweans are currently facing acute economic and financial challenges, the findings indicate that the financial situation for single mothers is exacerbated by the fact that they have to carry the financial saddle alone. Gender roles as assigned by the society through socialization expose women to domestic work which may make them feel timid to assert themselves on the formal economy which is male-dominated. As a result of such a gendered economic disadvantage, it may be challenging for single mothers to develop economic survival strategies that can adequately cushion them from financial risks especially because of childcare responsibilities, rejection from family, and the community as shown in the findings above. These findings are similar with the findings by Stack and Meredith [13] who revealed that matrifocality is associated with high financial risk and that this may culminate into poverty and inability of children to attend school. The findings however vary a bit with those of Golombok *et al.* [26] whose results showed that only 8% of the single mothers had dire financial need while 14% had mild financial need in the United Kingdom. Perhaps these disparities can be explained in light with the differences in economic developmental differences between the UK and Zimbabwe. The current austerity economic measures adopted by the government have eroded the buying power of most people's salaries and savings, making it difficult to survive. In agreement, Chitiyo, Vines, and Vandome [27] and Alao [28] point out that Zimbabwe's structural economic and political precariousness have greatly compromised the quality of life for many Zimbabweans, especially the marginalized groups.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

From a developmental perspective, it is critical to understand the irrefutable linkages between matrifocality, child poverty, feminization of poverty, feminization of HIV, and other social ills [16]. This is because sustainable development requires a holistic approach to solving social ills to inform interventions at individual, communal, and societal levels. At micro level, the findings have shown that some of the challenges faced by single mothers such as depression and high blood pressure are chronic in nature. This implies that unresolved socioemotional issues have a way of manifesting through health complications. An intervention gap is then noted where psychosocial support and therapeutic interventions through grief counseling or divorce counseling may not be common among single mothers and the whole population in general. It is therefore crucial to understand the psychosocial and developmental consequences which can emanate from a lack of psychosocial support. Visibility of these services through grassroots approaches such as "friendly benches" and encouraging pro-bono services is important especially for those in the lower economic class to prevent the onset of health complications. Crisis intervention through the strengthening of positive responsive mechanisms critical to cope with adverse situations such as divorce, grief, and unplanned single parenting are important to restore the social functioning of single mothers and their families. Such preventative intervention which departs from the curative and pathological approach to solving social ills is recommendable as it cushions single mothers from developing mental health and stress-related challenges in the future. This will help to build on the latent strengths of single mothers for their wellbeing and that of their children [29].

At relational level, the findings indicated that the exposure of children to homes that are characterized by explicit sexual activities render these children vulnerable to sex work. Since the cognitive processes of most children will still be developing, there is need for assessing children's environments to cushion them from commercial sex work. According to the Children's Act of 2001 of Zimbabwe, the safety of children should be prioritized with social workers having the mandate to ensure that children are not exposed to conditions that compromise their overall development. Due to the dire current economic situation in Zimbabwe [20], there is need to put in place socioeconomic safety nets that can guarantee the welfare of children's welfare because they represent the nation's future. There is therefore need to assess the application of this instrument ensuring that there are necessary resources for the translation of policies into programs that respond to the needs of children.

Furthermore, the study noted that single mothers' children can engage in commercial sex work to pay for their school fees. In a country where education is considered a right for all children, an implementation gap is noted. This is evident of the prevalence of social injustice and structural factors inhibiting children from enjoying their educational right. The first objective of the Education Act of 1996 states that no child in Zimbabwe shall be denied access to any school while Section 6 of the same section highlights the need for payment of school fees. Section 13.4 of the same Act gives heads of schools permission to deny access to children who have not paid their school fees [30]. The Education Amendment Bill of 2016 further emphasizes on the promotion of basic education for children. Such inconsistencies therefore need to be addressed and aligned to the dictates of the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 because education is a pillar of development. When the educational requirements of children are neglected, their future is compromised as the findings have indicated that most single mothers struggle to send their children to school. There is therefore need to reconsider and prioritize children's rights when policies are being crafted.

The study additionally confirmed the trends of feminization of poverty and child poverty among matrifocal families in Chiredzi. This explains the co-existence of transient and chronic poverty as this was mostly

attributed to structural unemployment as a result of an ailing economy and massive retrenchments. The structural theory [31] postulates that poverty in Zimbabwe is beyond human capabilities, but is rather chronically rooted in the policies, structures, and legislations of the government. Such findings have implications on issues of democracy and good governance. The financial and economic capacities of single mothers therefore ought to be strengthening to guarantee food security, health requirements, and educational needs for their children. Given their lone financial burden, poverty in Zimbabwe can only be eradicated when it is addressed on a policy level. The current policies seeking to empower women also need to be backed-up by resources to ensure the financial independence of single mothers. Feminism thus strongly believe that when women, including single mothers are financially secure, the lone saddle of childcare is made easier.

This underscores the need for citizens' full participation when policies are being endorsed as their effects have direct impact on the welfare of citizens. When citizens are alienated from decision-making processes, the policies are likely to have negative repercussions as citizens' participation is critical for the translation of any policy. The findings also showed that some of the interventions by NGOs who seek to empower single mothers through projects are not sustainable because the single mothers lack the requisite knowledge on how to run income-generating projects. It was reported that single mothers divert the projects' funds for personal use which may include food and rent. For these reasons, the Indigenization and Empowerment Act, Gender policy, Broad Based Women's Economic Empowerment Framework, and the Gender Responsive Economic Policy Management Initiative; policies that seek to improve the living standards of women including single mothers in Zimbabwe have not yielded much results.

Despite the country having made a number of gender policy changes and placing women issues on the agenda, there is need for active monitoring and evaluation of these policies to ensure the actual translation of these gender sensitive policies into practical programs which can effectively solve the social ills associated with gender disparities which disempowers and excludes women and single mothers from empowerment processes in Zimbabwe. Relevant educational training is critical to narrow economic gender gaps, positioning women, especially single mothers for development, if aspects such as feminization of poverty and feminization of unemployment are to be eradicated. While it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that there are necessary social safety nets and food security measures put in place to cushion the citizens, single mothers also need to develop positive aspirations regarding the welfare of their children to safeguard their children.

The study has also revealed that single mothers have difficulties in disciplining children due to sociocultural socialization. Landau and Griffith [31] and Zartler [2] posit that this is because the extended family bonds as well as kinship ties have been weakened as a nuclear family is more preferred today. Factors leading to single motherhood such as divorce, children being born out of wedlock, and widowhood may also contribute to the weakening of kinship relationships. The implications of this finding are that the children may be deprived of the social capital and assistance which might have come from their paternal relatives, for example, assistance with fees, and guidance on behavioral issues. Dropping out of school and identity crisis which may lead to maladaptive behavior may be resultant. Matrifocal families should therefore not be viewed through pathological lenses but be accepted in their form and be supported fully for their development. Strengthening of kinship relations based on the African value of Ubuntu is critical in empowering marginalized households such as matrifocal families. Cultural feminists argue for the urgent need to desist from sociocultural configurations that undermine women's ability to lead homes as this weakens their ability to adequately manage their homes. This requires "re-gendering" of social roles as the mother becomes a "bi-parent." Their inability to sufficiently provide food, health, and educational security for their children becomes a policy and developmental issue as these are

considered as children's rights in Zimbabwe. This demands that they adopt various coping mechanism to enhance their survival and that of their children. The process of social and economic empowerment may be necessary to socialize women to be bold and courageous for their economic independence.

CONCLUSION

The paper has identified a constellation of challenges surrounding matrifocal families. Negative attitudes and societal orientations which tolerate the exclusion and ostracism of single mothers within society have been flagged out in terms of their implications on the development of single-mother families. Different feminism perspectives have also been used to explain the sociocultural and structural factors which cause and reinforce the challenges underpinning single mothers. Through the ecological theory, the article has revealed that the challenges experienced by single mothers emanate from their interaction with their environment, at meso and/or macro levels. This has positioned different stakeholders to spearhead dialogue within societies to buttress on the need for communities to desist from a pathological view to single motherhood and incline toward greater inclusion. Due to the implications of the findings from the current study, guiding instruments such as the Children's Act of 2001, the Education Act of 2006, and other women empowerment policies have also been discussed to analyze their applicability in ensuring that women in Zimbabwe are capacitated for their development.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DECLARATION

There are no potential conflicts known.

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