

Demand for Institutional Childcare among marginalized Single-Parent Household in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the changing aspects of family-based care and institutional care services for children, highlighting the importance of the family environment while recognizing the necessity of formal childcare services in Delhi among single parents. Underlined by the studies of Elder (1998) and Sadownik and Brofenbrenner (2023), the study emphasizes the need of a secure and stable environment for the holistic development of the children, highlighting on human development that is relational and contextual, with an importance on children's growth within the framework of their peer groups. However, the challenges attached to it within the family are also not ignored.

The data has been drawn from the 102 respondents, it highlights that a significant portion of children come from single parent household, mainly single mothers facing considerable financial and emotional challenges directly affecting the quality of care necessary to the children which in turn affects the holistic development of these children.

The findings highlight the awareness of caregivers and the access to quality childcare institution shaving disparities in resource distribution, women's income, number of children, the presence of gender and age biases towards childcare decisions, role of extended family, the prevalent cultural and societal norms.

Keywords - Single mother, childcare, childcare institutions, social network, caregivers, best interest of the child, 'Institutional Care' as the last resort, Family-Based Care, holistic development.

INTRODUCTION

The rising trend of single parenthood in contemporary Indian society has increasingly pulled attention and recognition. Through the historical lens, widowhood was a significant cohort of single motherhood, specifically when remarriage was stigmatized or rejected (Ghosh and Kalyanwala, 2020). In the recent years, factors such as divorce, separation, or the decision to independently raise a child have increased the number of single-parent households (Desai, 2021).

In the developmental stages of children, their expectation, needs, and perception of the society differ, creating significant challenges for the lone mothers (Bornstein, 2015).

One of the major concerns for the single mothers is work life balancing and responsibilities of raising children, as infants and young children require exhaustive supervision and care, (Ghosh and Kalyanwala, 2020). This can be predominantly a matter of anxiety for single mothers who might have limited economical resources and support system. Furthermore, traditional norms cultural virtues, household management, and preparing them for future roles (Chaudhary and Verick, 2014), guiding them during the transition to adulthood, and addressing pressures related to breadwinning responsibilities (Ghosh and Kalyanwala, 2020) are distinct challenges.

Simultaneously, societal prejudices and discrimination in the workplace, the availability and approachability of these support networks may vary depending on the children's age and gender. This study contributes towards

existing understanding around single parenthood in India by illuminating various socio-economic factors that contribute to making life difficult for them and their children.

Rationale

A lack of acceptable and reasonable childcare options might force many single parents to make difficult decisions between their careers and their child care duties. Therefore, cultural norms and society expectations can have a significant impact on the childcare options and challenges that they encounter raising children

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature shows that numerous factors, challenges, constraints and choices, cultural norms affect the preference of childcare options amongst single parent households. Adams et al. (2002) focussed on the significance of formal and informal childcare arrangements for single mothers. Due to limited resources and constraint access to childcare facilities such mothers depend on family members and neighbours. This kind of informal support system, though proves to be cost effective but are unreliable and the quality of care is compromised. Warren (2004) explained that significant proportion of single mothers choose 'work from home' or part-time jobs to balance the responsibilities of childcare limiting their career growth and financial independence, resulting in a vicious cycle of poverty. Neimanns and Busamayer's (2021), highlighted that affluent single mothers choose formal childcare facilities like day-care centres or domestic helps providing quality care to their children. Families from lower financial background face higher challenges in affordability (Coley et. al., 2014; Forry et. al., 2013).

Moreover, the inclination of prioritization of childcare preferences is propelled by the concerns of safety and well-being of children and the desire to nurture the bond with the younger ones. Brandon and Hofferth (2003), observed that single mothers prefer keeping younger children at home or with extended family members whereas they choose childcare institutions for older children.

Cain and Combs (2005) and Hays (1996) pointed out that the traditional perception of mothers being the primary caregivers results in pressure from the societal lens on single mothers when they prioritize career growth over their childcare responsibilities. While single fathers have a better financial situation compared to single mothers, who have (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) fewer social network resources (Cain and Combs, 2005; Hays, 1996) like extended family members, friends, and neighbours for assistance in childcare, forcing them to opt for childcare institutes.

Due to geographical locations, socio-economic status, and other related factors, single mothers settle for lesser pay or suboptimal childcare options and waitlists, resulting in low-income and limited access to childcare, especially for those from rural areas (Fergusson et. al., 2008; Henley and Lyons, 2000).

The desire of single mothers to put their children in childcare institutions has drawn attention to the quality of childcare, like well-trained staff, age-appropriate activities, a caring environment, and high-quality facilities provided by the childcare institutes, which impels their interest in utilizing this facility (Forry et. al., 2013; Huston et. al., 2002).

Some caregivers presume that childcare institutes provide development opportunities and high social interactions while others consider it to be having negative impacts on the wellbeing and may damage the parent child bond (Fram and Kim, 2008; Coley et. al., 2014), that is separating them from primary caregivers is a potential concern among the caregivers, specifically when the children are in their young age (Fram and Kim, 2008; Meyers and Jordan, 2006).

Policies related to workplace and status of employment plays a major role in utilising childcare institutions by the caregivers. Caregivers who seek full time employment are more likely to admit their children in childcare facilities to accommodate their schedules related to childcare (Huston et. al. 2002; Meyers and Jordan, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the preferences of childcare and challenges faced by single parents in India. The study sample includes 102 single parents with children of varied ages and genders living in Delhi. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. This method enabled the researcher to acquire a diverse range of perspectives and experiences from these single parents in Delhi, increasing the richness and depth of the data collected.

A. Objectives

1. To understand the preferred childcare options for single parents in Delhi, and how these preferences differ.
2. To delve into the unique challenges faced by the single parents in comparison to other caregivers in accessing and availing the requisite childcare services.
3. To explore the readiness of these single parents to send children to institutional childcare facilities.

B. Method

Using a mixed-method approach, this study gathered data through survey to assess the preferences of childcare and the challenges they faced with their children. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, 2018), Patton (2015) proposed that combining qualitative and quantitative data gathering allows for data triangulation from several sources, which improves analysis of the study findings. In-Depth Interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule was taken with single parents in Delhi. This data collection allowed sense making of the experiences, challenges, and decision-making processes of these single mothers about childcare preferences and the impact of raising children, allowing participants to freely disclose their perspectives and experiences (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Statistical tools like percentage were used to uncover patterns between factors such as childcare preferences, obstacles encountered, and child rearing. All participants were provided informed consent forms, and their privacy and anonymity throughout the process was protected.

C. Theoretical Framework

Pertinent theoretical frameworks related to parenting and care giving responsibilities, such as the life course perspective (Elder, 1998) and the ecological systems theory stated that the intricate web of interactions and the social environment shapes and contextualizes a child's existence and development. The "set of nested structures, each inside the next" is not isolated from the others rather functions in a nested structural ecology.

The process of becoming is a dialectic of adjustment that involves the individual and their social environment (page 3 Bronfenbrenner, 1979), have provided valuable insights and guided the interpretation of findings. They explain why childcare decisions are not merely individual choices, but are structured by the complex systems of the society. The World Health Organisation (2010), identifies the importance of societal barriers and how to overcome them while examining the social, cultural, and economic aspects that contribute to the difficulties faced by single parents in Delhi in accessing and using childcare services.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: placement of children

Placement	Sample Size
Child Care Institutes	14 (14%)
Family	88 (86%)

Table 1 shows data from 102 children, divided into two groups: those in childcare institutions (14) and those enrolled for childcare institutions but living with their family (88). The vast majority, 86%, live with their families, with the remaining 14% placed in childcare institutions throughout nine districts of Delhi.

The data underscores the importance of family-based care while acknowledging the necessity of childcare institutions for the holistic and optimal development of children. Bowlby’s (1988) attachment theory mentioned that for a child’s emotional and psychological well-being a secured attachment with the primary caregivers is essential. Bronfenbrenner (1979), in the ecological systems theory highlighted ‘family’ as the prime environment for the development of children. A child thrives within continued communications within the family providing a strong structure to their sociability, dignity and mental strength. On the contrary, family-based care sometimes come with challenges like domestic violence deprived quality of care to the children, mental health concerns of the parents, high financial constraints and socio-cultural factors. The research brings to light that structured institutional care can be a better alternative for children from vulnerable families although, the law says that institutional care should be the last resort (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015). However, childcare institutions providing high quality of care to children can help them have positive achievements with their opportunities, support and routines (Zeanah et. al. 2003). Moreover, childcare institutions do take the responsibility of vulnerable children but may not still reach the level of a family environment. Therefore, the benefits of alternative care or family-based care are determined by the stability and its resourcefulness. Protection of children should be multifaceted in which a child thrives best, providing a safety net and best possible outcomes targeting the risk related to it.

Table 2: child placement and marital status of parents

Marital Status of Parents	Children in Child Care Institutes (N=14)	Children in Family (N=88)	Grand Total
	Couples	Single Mother	Single Father
Divorced / Separated	0 (0%)	5 (71%)	1 (25%)
Married	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Widow	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	0 (0%)
Widower	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (75%)
Dead Parents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 2 throws light on the different family structures and the marital status of the parents of the 102 children. A sizable proportion, 55 children, were from divorced or separated parents, with a considerable difference between single mothers and single fathers. 17 Single mothers(bereaved) cared for 43 of these children, while 14 single fathers (widowers) cared for only 12. This emphasizes the difficulties faced by these single parents, particularly in terms of mental and financial obligations, as they managed the responsibilities of raising children alone.

In contrast, the presence of both parents does not guarantee a healthy family environment (Purkins and Borden, 2003), as the findings showed that of these families (7%) desired that their children be sent to childcare institutes. Notably, the 9 orphan children were the most vulnerable in this cohort as they were taken care of by their extended family, which were looking forward to drop the load on to the childcare institutes. These children, at times develop high risk of issues related to identity, behavioural, adjustment, attachment, emotional and low life satisfaction in their later life (Mwoma and Pillai, 2015).

The complex nature of the family system highlighted the necessity of distinct understanding and customized approach for the development of children under various circumstances. However, extended family network like grandparents and kins can come as a respite to the challenges by providing support, promoting better stability and cultural preservation (Cuddeback, 2004). Grandparents provide emotional well-being and continuity in

development where parents are absent or deceased (Dunifon, 2013). Often, negative impacts like cognitive and socio-emotional developmental challenges are observed in children in institutional care (Smyke, 2007).

In this study data showed, disruption of household (divorced/separated/widowed) led to challenge in fulfilling the primary functions effectively. Evidently, other social institutions like extended family helps to maintain the social equilibrium. The structural functional lens, showed that different social structures adapt to fulfil the necessary social functions when the contemporary family units are absent.

Table 3: child placement, caregivers and their economic status

Responsibility of Children (Caregivers)	Children in Child Care Institutes (N=14)	Children in Family (N=88)	Grand Total
	Couples	Single Mother	Single Father
Parents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Father	0 (0%)	0 (57%)	1 (0%)
Mother	0 (0%)	4 (0%)	0 (25%)
Grand Parents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Extended Family	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)
CCI (Child Care Institute)	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	2 (50%)
Employment Status of Parents	Children in Child Care Institutes (N=14)	Children in Family (N=88)	Grand Total
	Couples	Single Mother	Single Father
No Job	0 (0%)	4 (57%)	3 (75%)
Domestic Worker	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	1 (25%)
Self Employed	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Service Holder	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	0 (0%)
Family Income of the Parents	Children in Child Care Institutes (N=14)	Children in Family (N=88)	Grand Total
	Couples	Single Mother	Single Father
No Income	0 (0%)	4 (57%)	4 (100%)
Less than 7,000	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)
7,000 and More	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	0 (0%)

The table no 3 delves on the family dynamics and diverse child support network for child caring. Majority of the children were with the family members waiting for the process of enrolment in childcare institutes. Only 8 children in this group were in the direct care of childcare institutions. A sizable proportion, 50 children, were predominantly the responsibility of single mothers, followed by 19 children in the care of single fathers. In addition, 6 children lived with both parents. Notably, 10 children living with their grandparents were orphans, and surprisingly, there were 9 children living with extended family members even though they had at least one living parent, implying that the extended family support system was used. Coleman’s theory of social capital, is a

collection of assets found in social networks within a society and in familial relationships (Marsden, 2005; Coleman, 1990) as was reflected in this study data too. He held the view that a child's or adolescent's growth depends on social capital, and that healthy communities like the extended family were crucial as sources of social capital that may assist in raising them (Marsden, 2005). According to Coleman, social capital basically exists in the social structures that hold interactions between individuals and it uses reason to provide an explanation for human behaviour. He contended that actors' goals are decided by utility maximizing pursuit of their own self-interest (Jordan, 2015). Hence Coleman (1988) integrated the rational assumption of economists that individuals act autonomously and for self-interest with the social behaviour of individuals (Claridge, 2015).

The data highlights the challenges faced by diverse family structures particularly where children are cared by their kins to ensure the wellbeing of these children. Hank and Buber (2009), and Minkler and Fuller (2005) identified significant role of grandparents and a complex interaction between providing services and inter-generational support for the family and shaping the family environment of young parents. While this kind of family arrangement was beneficial to the children, it posed a stressful situation for these grandparents both financially and functionally. Research by Waing and Zhang (2018); Mao et al. (2018) showed how caring for grandchildren hindered their ability to accumulate savings for their old age. The transmission of cultural values and tradition are the benefits for children supported by extended family as mentioned by Eshemokha et al. (2022). Previous researches have delved into the challenges and benefits associated with children living in childcare institutions providing them with a structural educational system and development facilities, however the impact on emotional well-being of children cannot be ignored (Browne, 2009). To promote positive outcomes for children living in childcare institutes, Baker mans et al. (2012) laid stress on the importance of proper staffing, favourable environment and quality care.

According to data on caregivers' work status aligning with table III, the vast majority (44%) are currently unemployed. Within this category, a stark discrepancy existed between single mothers and single fathers. 42% of single mothers without jobs wanted their children to go to childcare centers, compared to only 23% of unemployed single fathers. Domestic workers account for 23% of employed single mothers, compared to 9% for single fathers. The self-employment category includes 17% of single mothers and 18% of single fathers. Higher level of flexibility and autonomy in self-employment helped in managing responsibilities of childcare efficiently as was perceived by Hilbrecht and Lero (2014). Notably, 19% of single mothers work in structured offices, as compared to 50% single fathers. In cases when both parents had died, the data showed that 7 caregivers (grandparents or other family members) were unemployed, one was a domestic worker, and one worked in a service capacity.

The data throws light on the employment status of parents who are caregivers, particularly single mothers and the impact on adequate childcare. Jobless single mothers prefer childcare institutes as an option for the benefits of the children whereas unemployed single fathers are less interested in childcare facilities. The findings align with Sankaran (2013), study suggesting that a significant proportion of single mothers are domestic workers who are part of the informal sector in India categorized by low-income, limited benefits and lack of job and social security leading to the vulnerability faced by these single mothers as domestic help influencing the decision of childcare arrangements. Hegewich (2013) highlighted the constant gender gaps across all sectors impacting job security, income levels, influencing decisions in childcare in the Indian labour market resonating the gendered intersectional expectation, that despite being employed, women are expected to prioritize childcare leading them to approach institutional support.

The data on care giving parent's income levels showed a striking discrepancy between single mothers and single fathers who want to place their children in childcare facilities. A shocking 66% of single mothers wanted their children to attend childcare institutes as they do not have an income, compared to 36% of single fathers. 13% of single mothers earned more ₹7000, while 21% earned less. In comparison, 55% of single fathers earned more than ₹7000, while only 9% earned less, attributing to limited access of well-paid job opportunities for women (Dufloy, 2012). Furthermore, the findings showed that 9 caregivers of children who had lost both parents had no source of income, emphasizing the families' fragile financial status and the probable need for further assistance and resources.

As single mothers grapple with challenges related to limited resources leading to their economic vulnerability and inefficiency of providing adequate support and care to their children, ultimately becoming the driving force for desiring institutional care for their children aligning with the study of Bhargava, 2005. Anjali et al. (2017) study showed that in low-income households’ mothers and kins play a crucial role in childcare which is a cultural norm in India, while Patel (2005) mentioned that, lately there has been a shift in gender roles for care giving because of change in urbanisation and socio-economic factors. Interestingly, the high cost of formal childcare keeps the single mothers away from using the benefit. The cycle of poverty perpetuates the cost of formal childcare facilities creating a barrier for single mothers with low earning, as participating in a full-fledged manner in the workforce was a challenge along with childcare responsibilities preventing them to achieve financial independence, drowning them into economic vulnerability (Kalil and Ryan, 2010).

Table 4: child placement and their demography

Category	Children in Child Care Institutes (N=14)	Children in Family (N=88)	Grand Total
No. of Children			
One	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	3 (75%)
Two	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	1 (25%)
More than Two	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)
Age of Children			
Up to 5 yrs	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)
6 yrs to 10 yrs	0 (0%)	4 (57%)	2 (50%)
11 yrs to 15 yrs	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
16 yrs and above	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	2 (50%)
Diversity Ratio of Children (Gender Status)			
Female	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	2 (50%)
Male	0 (0%)	5 (71%)	2 (50%)
This table organizes the data by the number of children, their ages, and gender status, showing ho			

The data on the number of children living with single parents who wish to enroll their only child in a childcare facility in table no. IV indicates that, 82% single fathers have only one child living with them, while the percentage of single women with one child is(72%) with no one back home to take care of the child when the mother is away at work. This condition is not so, as Brady (2016) showed in the case when there are multiple children because generally, the older child takes care of the younger siblings, when the breadwinner is out for work aligning with the study. Interestingly, 21% of single mothers live with two children as compared to 9% of single fathers. It has also been observed in the table, that single fathers have a lower percentage of custody of multiple children as compared to single mothers. Cad well (1993), study rightly explains this scenario stating that the societal expectations and biases favouring custody of children by mothers leave fathers facing greater challenges in acquiring custody of multiple children.

In the recent years there has been a gradual shift in gender roles because of the socio-economic changes and urbanization. Though the economic disparity between genders exists, the data suggests that single fathers are gradually taking more responsibilities in childcare (Anyatengbey, 2016).

The table – 4 highlighted the keenness of the caregivers to put their children in child care institutes, especially single mothers, for the cognitive social and emotional development of their children as most of the children fall in the age category of 6 to 15 years. Among single mothers with children living with them, (40%) are children aged 11 to 15, followed by 26% aged 16 and up and 25% aged 6 to 10.

The caregivers understand that a disruption of proper care during this time period impacts the future of the children (Rutter, 1980). Notably, only about 9% of single mothers have children under the age of five that is early childhood is a period where the mother should be the primary caregiver as expected in the traditional gender scenario. The majority (45%) of single fathers who want their children in such institutions had children aged 11 to 15, followed by 23% of single fathers with children aged 16 and over, and 18% with children aged 6 to 10. Interestingly, 14% of single fathers with children under the age of five expressed a preference for institutional childcare. Furthermore, the caregivers of six orphaned children over the age of five opted to place them in childcare facilities.

The findings above in table 4 also showed distinct gender patterns in caregivers' choices for placing children in childcare establishments. Among single mothers who lived with their children, 60% wanted to send their female children to such facilities, compared to 40% for male children. In contrast, single fathers had an equal preference of 50% for both male and female children. Notably, when it comes to orphaned children, 83% of caregivers registered to childcare institutes for female orphans, but only 17% did so for male orphans. Couples who have approached childcare institutes are parents of 71% female children and 29% male children.

Within the cohort of children previously admitted to childcare institutes, male and female children from single fathers are distributed equally. However, the data showed a skewed distribution for single mothers' children, with 29% of females and 71% of males attending childcare establishments. Furthermore, 33% of the children in these facilities are female orphans, with 67% being male orphans. Interestingly, no children from couples were living in childcare facilities.

The data suggested that gender biases related to children across all the groups of caregivers, especially while deciding for childcare arrangements. This has been particularly noticed while comparing between single mothers and single fathers. The observation in the table aligns with the research of Lundberg (2005) that child gender bias is important in low-income traditional society.

The preference of son in developing countries has received a great deal of attention. The findings were inconsistent with the societal norms of India displaying child choices based on gender. Moreover, the data showed that there was emphasis on the security of girls over boys creating safe spaces around girls increasing the desire of childcare institutes for them by their parents (Vaitla 2017). Endendijk's et. al. (2017) study examined the relation between child gender and parents' control which was further moderated by their stereotypical thinking. The difference in treatment accounted for the gender differences leading to having behavioural changes in children. Studies have shown that men take active roles in childcare and home in strengthening the family which is highlighted here on the part of single fathers (Goldscheider et. al. 2014). Sumsion (2005) highlighted that single mother reflected their biasness on gender when it comes to childcare environment. Some stereotypes reflect positive while some are negative contributing to prejudices, existing through words and actions of families, kins and environment of children. The socio-cultural factors expectations, gender roles, traditions influence the decision of the caregivers on childcare arrangements (Burje 2016).

A family-based care had a significant need for children below 6 years because of their early childhood attachment and development needs (Davidson et. al. 2017). Children above 10 years are more likely to be in an institutional care because finding a suitable family-based care is difficult for this age (Roy et. al. 2000) and older children face greater challenges in receiving appropriate support and resources (Hyde and Kammerer, 2009). Elder (1998) showed evidently how the circumstances of caregivers impact childcare arrangement. According to developmental theory, children and their environment interact in a reciprocal, regular, and recurrent manner to facilitate development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff, 2009). Positive interactions and the development of secure attachment bonds are facilitated by the stability and continuity of child care providers (Ahnert et al., 2006; Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Raikes, 1993).

CONCLUSION

The analysis aligns theories already established on nurturing relationships, ecological systems and attachment. It underscores the nuanced understanding of childcare arrangements, dynamics of the family and the surroundings, affecting the well-being of the children. However, challenges like domestic violence, mental health concerns of the caregivers and financial constraints can lead to the choice of child care institutes for children.

The role of kins particularly grandparents in providing care for children reflected the culture and societal norms of the Indian society. The high rate of unemployment, low pay, financial constraints, age of the children, societal stigma related to motherhood affecting adversely on the children of single mothers due to gender inequalities in the labour market that creates a disparity in the income levels between single mothers and single fathers. The gender biases are also evidently noticed in the decision-making process of placing children in childcare institutes.

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