Beyond Social Support: Identity Reconstruction and Adaptive Coping in the Transition to Single Motherhood: An Integrative Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

The transition to single motherhood can disrupt established identities, relationships, routines, and expectations while increasing the demands associated with caregiving, income provision, and household management. Research has examined the economic pressures, psychological well-being, resilience, and social support of single mothers, but these strands are not always integrated into an explanation of how women renegotiate who they are during role transition and how that process may shape coping. This conceptual paper develops an integrative framework that positions identity reconstruction as a potential process linking role transition with empowerment and adaptive coping. Drawing on Transition Theory, Identity Theory, psychological empowerment, and the stress-buffering perspective on social support, the paper distinguishes the triggering conditions of transition, identity-related appraisal and renegotiation, empowerment-related resources, and coping responses. It proposes that identity reconstruction is neither a linear nor universally positive process: it may involve continuity, conflict, experimentation, and revision, and its consequences depend partly on material resources, social recognition, and the availability of practical support. The framework advances a process-oriented and strengths-sensitive account of adaptation while avoiding the assumption that personal agency alone can overcome structural disadvantage. It also identifies propositions and research directions for qualitative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods inquiry. The paper contributes a theory-informed model for investigating how identity processes and contextual resources interact during the transition to single motherhood. As a conceptual synthesis, the framework requires empirical examination and should not be interpreted as a validated causal model.

Keywords: single motherhood; identity reconstruction; role transition; adaptive coping; psychological empowerment; social support

INTRODUCTION

Family life is shaped by changing partnership arrangements, employment conditions, care expectations, and social policies. For women who become the primary or sole parent, the transition may follow divorce, separation, widowhood, abandonment, or childbirth outside a continuing partnership. Although these pathways differ in meaning and material consequences, each can require substantial adjustment to family routines, financial responsibilities, parenting arrangements, and social relationships. The transition is therefore more than a change in household composition: it can alter the roles through which a woman understands herself and is recognised by others (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024).

Single mothers may have to coordinate paid work, childcare, domestic labour, and emotional support with fewer opportunities to share these responsibilities with a co-parent. Their experiences are not uniform. Financial resources, employment security, the age and needs of children, legal arrangements, family relationships, community attitudes, and access to services can shape both the demands of transition and the

resources available to manage them. A sound conceptual account must therefore recognise agency without treating adaptation as solely an individual responsibility (Cook, 2012; Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024).

Research on single motherhood has considered stress, resilience, social support, and psychological well-being. These areas are relevant but can remain conceptually separated: stress research may focus on demands and coping responses; resilience research may emphasise adaptation under adversity; and social-support research may examine the protective role of relationships. Less fully articulated is the process through which women reinterpret prior identities, negotiate expectations attached to marriage and motherhood, and develop a revised sense of self that may influence how they respond to changing demands. Identity reconstruction offers a way to examine this process (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024; Danurswari et al., 2024; Shawaqfeh, 2024).

This paper argues that identity reconstruction should be treated as a potential coping-related process, not simply as a positive outcome that automatically follows a life transition. A woman may reconstruct her identity by integrating continuity with change, rejecting stigmatising social labels, developing a stronger sense of autonomy, or redefining what competent parenting means to her. Conversely, identity conflict may persist when a new self-understanding is not supported by material resources or social recognition. The paper therefore place identity reconstruction within a wider relationship among transition conditions, empowerment, coping, and social context.

The paper has three objectives: (1) to integrate relevant theoretical perspectives into an explanation of identity reconstruction during the transition to single motherhood; (2) to develop a conceptual framework and propositions that specify plausible relationships among the central constructs; and (3) to identify implications for research and practice. Its intended contribution is theoretical integration and model development, rather than empirical testing or a claim that the proposed relationships have already been established.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND SCOPE

This manuscript is designed as an integrative conceptual paper. Conceptual articles can synthesise theories, adapt an existing theory to a new phenomenon, or develop a model by specifying relationships among concepts. Such papers should explain why particular theories are selected, how they are used analytically, and what new understanding follows from their integration (Jaakkola, 2020). An integrative review is appropriate when a topic spans multiple bodies of literature and the purpose is to combine perspectives to develop a model rather than to estimate a pooled effect (Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019).

The current draft draws on four theoretical resources: Schlossberg's transition perspective, Identity Theory, psychological empowerment, and the stress-buffering account of social support. Each is assigned a distinct analytical role. Transition Theory helps organise the conditions and resources associated with adjustment; Identity Theory explains identity meanings and role-related expectations; psychological empowerment clarifies the development of perceived control and agency; and social-support theory explains how relationships may provide emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal resources.

Literature identification and selection followed a theory-led, purposive integrative approach rather than a systematic-review protocol. The search and selection process was organised around five concept clusters: (1) single motherhood and lone-parent transitions; (2) identity, role meanings, and identity theory; (3) coping, stress appraisal, and resilience; (4) social support and psychological empowerment; and (5) structural conditions, including employment, care responsibilities, and access to services. The reference list was developed iteratively from relevant theoretical works, review articles, and empirical studies cited in the literature, with additional attention to recent studies that could illuminate the proposed relationships or provide plausible alternative explanations. Sources were retained when they made a clear contribution to defining a construct, explaining a theoretical mechanism, documenting the context of single motherhood, or identifying a boundary condition for the proposed framework. Sources that were tangential to these aims or did not provide enough accessible bibliographic or substantive information to assess their relevance were not used as central support for the model. The process prioritised conceptual relevance and explanatory contribution, not statistical representativeness or exhaustive coverage.

For transparency, the author checked available publisher records and abstracts or full texts to confirm citation details and DOIs where available. The manuscript did not use a preregistered protocol, a single fixed database search, independent duplicate screening, or a formal risk-of-bias tool; it therefore does not report search strings, screening counts, inter-rater agreement, or a PRISMA flow diagram. The review should be read as a purposive integrative synthesis, with selection decisions shaped by the paper's conceptual objectives. This approach supports theory development but may omit relevant studies, privilege accessible publications, and reflect author judgement. The propositions are consequently framed as hypotheses for future investigation rather than conclusions established by a comprehensive evidence review.

SINGLE MOTHERHOOD AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLE TRANSITION

Transition Conditions and Unequal Resources

A role transition occurs when an event or change alters the responsibilities, relationships, routines, or expectations through which a person organises everyday life. For single mothers, transition conditions may include the circumstances leading to sole parenting, the degree of control over the change, the time elapsed since the transition, ongoing contact with a co-parent, and the stability of income and housing. These conditions matter because the same nominal role: single motherhood: can involve very different levels of uncertainty, conflict, and practical burden (Schlossberg, 1981).

The transition may require simultaneous adjustments across work, family, social life, and personal identity. Women may need to change work schedules, seek childcare, renegotiate responsibilities with relatives, manage legal or financial matters, and respond to children's emotional needs. Such demands can accumulate. An analysis focused only on individual resilience risks overlooking the role of employment practices, childcare availability, income adequacy, housing, and public support in shaping what coping options are realistically available.

Identity Disruption, Continuity, and Renegotiation

Identity refers to meanings people attach to themselves in relation to personal characteristics, social positions, and roles. Identity reconstruction is used here to describe the ongoing work of reviewing, revising, integrating, or reaffirming those meanings following a significant transition. It is not assumed to mean abandoning a previous identity. A woman may continue to value her identity as a partner, professional, daughter, or community member while redefining how these identities relate to her current parenting role (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The transition may challenge internal expectations, for example, beliefs about what a family should look like or what it means to be a successful mother, and external expectations expressed through family norms, workplace assumptions, or stigma. Identity reconstruction can involve making sense of the transition, deciding which previous commitments to retain, challenging imposed labels, and establishing a workable narrative about the present and future. These activities may support coping by helping a person identify priorities, recognise competence, and choose actions consistent with a revised self-understanding (Burke & Stets, 2009; Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024).

Identity reconstruction should not be equated with positive thinking. Some women may experience ambivalence, grief, anger, shame, relief, or pride at different times, and these responses can coexist. A framework that assumes a single progression from disruption to empowerment risks imposing a normative ideal of resilience. Instead, reconstruction is treated as iterative, context-dependent, and potentially incomplete.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND INTEGRATION

Transition Theory: Organising the Conditions of Adaptation

Schlossberg's transition framework directs attention to the characteristics of a transition and to resources that shape how an individual responds. The commonly used four-part structure of Situation, Self, Support, and

Strategies offers a practical organising lens. Situation concerns the circumstances and perceived features of the transition; Self concerns personal and demographic resources and the meaning attached to the event; Support concerns interpersonal and institutional resources; and Strategies concerns responses used to manage the change (Schlossberg, 2011).

For the present framework, Transition Theory provides the broad process context. It helps explain why identity reconstruction is not expected to occur in the same way for every single mother: the timing and circumstances of transition, prior experiences, available support, and coping options may differ. However, Transition Theory alone does not fully specify the identity mechanisms through which role meanings are negotiated. Identity Theory is therefore used to explain this more specific process.

Identity Theory: Explaining Role Meanings and Self-Verification

Identity Theory conceptualises identity through meanings associated with social roles and the interactions in which those meanings are enacted and confirmed. Role expectations may be disrupted when a person's circumstances change or when others respond to her in ways that conflict with her self-understanding (Burke & Stets, 2009). For a woman transitioning to single motherhood, previous role meanings may no longer fit her daily responsibilities, while social reactions may reinforce or challenge her emerging identity.

Identity reconstruction in this framework includes three analytically distinguishable activities: reflection on disrupted role meanings; negotiation between personal self-understanding and social expectations; and integration of a revised identity into everyday decisions and relationships. These activities are proposed as processes that may shape coping, rather than as stages that must occur in a fixed order. Identity work can also be constrained by stigma, financial dependence, insecure employment, or limited opportunities to enact a preferred identity.

Psychological Empowerment: Connecting Identity and Perceived Agency

Psychological empowerment concerns a person's perceived capacity to influence circumstances and participate in decisions affecting her life. Zimmerman (1995) discusses empowerment as a context-sensitive construct involving intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural dimensions. In this paper, empowerment is not treated as an inevitable consequence of identity reconstruction. Rather, a revised self-understanding may support perceived competence and autonomy when it is accompanied by opportunities, resources, and social conditions that allow agency to be enacted.

For example, a mother may come to see herself as capable of making independent decisions, but this belief may not translate into effective action if childcare is unavailable or employment is insecure. Empowerment should therefore be understood as both psychological and contextual. This distinction prevents the framework from suggesting that confidence alone resolves structural barriers.

Social Support: a Resource and a Context for Identity Work

Cohen and Wills (1985) distinguish the stress-buffering role of social support from its potential benefits under a wider range of circumstances. In the present framework, support includes emotional reassurance, information and guidance, practical assistance such as childcare, and feedback that helps an individual evaluate her circumstances and abilities. Support can be provided by relatives, friends, peers, employers, community organisations, service providers, or formal institutions (Cook, 2012; Mansor et al., 2025).

Support may influence adaptation through more than one route. Practical help can reduce immediate demands and make coping strategies feasible. Emotional and appraisal support may counter isolation and reinforce a woman's sense that her revised identity is legitimate. Informational support can expand awareness of employment, legal, financial, or parenting options. Support can also be unhelpful when it is conditional, controlling, stigmatising, or inconsistent with the mother's own priorities. Accordingly, the framework focuses on the quality, relevance, and accessibility of support rather than assuming that more support is always better.

Why Integrate these Perspectives

The theories perform complementary rather than interchangeable functions. Transition Theory identifies the conditions under which adjustment takes place; Identity Theory explains how role meanings are disrupted and renegotiated; psychological empowerment specifies one possible link between revised identity and perceived agency; and social-support theory explains how relational and institutional resources can enable or constrain identity work and coping. Their integration supports a process model that includes both psychological mechanisms and contextual conditions.

The proposed theoretical contribution is not that identity, empowerment, coping, and social support are individually new concepts. It is the specification of identity reconstruction as a potentially important process within role transition, the distinction between identity-related change and empowerment, and the proposition that this process is conditional on social and material contexts. The framework also allows for non-linearity and for circumstances in which identity reconstruction does not produce better coping.

CRITICAL SYNTHESIS OF RELATED LITERATURE

A central requirement for this paper is to move from a list of relevant concepts to a critical synthesis of what each research stream explains and leaves unresolved. Research on single mothers' well-being has documented psychosocial challenges and the importance of multiple resources, but a broad review of well-being does not automatically explain the process by which role meanings are reconstructed. Dharani and Balamurugan (2024), for example, review psychosocial influences on single mothers' well-being. Their work is relevant to the problem context, but the present paper asks a more specific process question: how might changing self-understandings connect a major role transition with the selection and interpretation of coping responses?

Research on resilience offers a second relevant stream. Danurswari et al. (2024) review resilience among single working mothers and identify internal and external protective factors, including self-acceptance and support systems. This work supports treating adaptation as involving both personal and contextual resources. However, resilience and identity reconstruction should not be used as synonyms. Resilience usually refers to a process or pattern of adaptation in the face of adversity; identity reconstruction refers to changes, continuities, or negotiations in the meanings through which a person understands herself and her roles. Identity reconstruction may be one process contributing to resilience, but it may also be difficult, ambivalent, or incomplete without necessarily indicating an absence of resilience. However, their conference review retained only two articles. Its conclusions provide a limited contextual prompt rather than a comprehensive estimate of protective effects or evidence of an identity-mediated pathway.

A third stream examines the relationship between social support and adaptation. Shawaqfeh (2024) reports an empirical study of perceived social support, social self-efficacy, and resilience among single mothers in Jordan. The volunteer sample of 534 women provides association-based evidence, not a test of identity reconstruction or causal direction. The cited version has mixed open peer-review assessments, with one approval and one non-approval, which warrants caution about its measurement and interpretation. Cook's (2012) qualitative synthesis of single parents' transitions from welfare to work also shows why support should not be treated as uniformly beneficial: networks can provide resources, but reciprocal obligations and the transfer of responsibility from the state to family networks can create additional barriers. Taken together, these studies encourage a contextual rather than purely individual explanation of adaptation.

The identity literature adds a different analytical focus. Identity Theory explains how meanings attached to social roles are developed, enacted, and confirmed through interaction (Burke & Stets, 2009). This perspective makes it possible to ask how a transition to single motherhood affects role meanings, how external responses reinforce or challenge those meanings, and how women may revise their self-understandings. Yet identity theory alone does not provide a complete account of material constraints or the practical resources required to act on a revised identity. The present framework therefore connects identity reconstruction to empowerment and coping while treating support and structural resources as contextual conditions.

The transition literature provides an organising view of adjustment over time. Schlossberg's framework directs attention to the situation, the self, support, and strategies available to an individual during transition. Its value here is to prevent the paper from assuming that the transition has one uniform meaning or outcome. The identity-focused contribution is to specify a possible process within that broader transition: women may review and renegotiate role meanings as they respond to altered responsibilities and social expectations. The empowerment perspective then helps distinguish a revised self-understanding from a perceived or actual ability to influence circumstances.

The synthesis suggests four conceptual distinctions that should remain explicit throughout the manuscript. First, identity reconstruction is not the same as coping: reconstruction concerns self-meanings, whereas coping concerns efforts to manage demands. Second, identity reconstruction is not the same as empowerment: a woman may understand herself differently without gaining access to resources or decision-making power. Third, empowerment is not the same as resilience: empowerment concerns perceived and enacted agency, whereas resilience concerns adaptation across adversity. Fourth, social support is not a personality trait or an automatic protective factor; it is a relational and institutional resource whose quality, fit, and consequences vary.

The originality claim is therefore bounded: this paper offers a proposed synthesis of identity-related meanings, empowerment, coping, and contextual resources. It does not claim that earlier literature has ignored these processes. Mansor et al. (2025) already propose a contextual framework for single mothers' support and coping in Malaysia. The present extension is to specify identity reconstruction as a distinct candidate mechanism and identify alternatives that could explain the same coping outcomes. Neither conceptual framework establishes a tested mediation effect.

Recent Evidence: What the Proposed Mechanism must Explain

Ng et al. (2025) interviewed 15 single mothers in Singapore and identified themes involving challenges, guilt and stigma, support, coping, and growth. These accounts connect social conditions with interpretations of motherhood, making them relevant to the model. However, a descriptive thematic study does not establish that identity reconstruction preceded coping or caused improved adjustment. Narratives of growth may reflect practical assistance, retrospective interpretation, or both. The study supports asking about identity-related meanings, while leaving the proposed mechanism unconfirmed.

Li and Zhong (2025) examine care penalties among poor single mothers in Zhuhai, China. Their qualitative account connects gendered care expectations with occupational restrictions, emotional strain, social relationships, and identity difficulties. This challenges an explanation in which insufficient confidence is the main obstacle to coping. A mother may reinterpret her competence without escaping a care burden that constrains employment. The analytical implication is that identity change and material opportunity require separate evidence. Findings from this setting should inform contextual questions rather than be generalised to all Chinese or Malaysian mothers.

McDonnell and Gracia (2024), using repeated observations of 5,654 women in Ireland, report that inequalities in family stressors statistically account for a substantial share of the mental-health difference between lone and partnered mothers. Their analysis foregrounds caregiving strain, parental conflict, and financial strain. This provides a competing explanation for adjustment: reduced exposure to stressors may improve well-being without identity reconstruction. Statistical decomposition does not by itself identify a causal mechanism, and depressive symptoms are not interchangeable with adaptive coping or identity coherence.

Sarfaraz and Ali (2025) report associations between social support, maternal stress, and resilience among divorced and widowed mothers recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Their findings suggest that pathways into single motherhood deserve separate attention. Yet a regression predictor is not necessarily a causal influence, and group differences may also reflect income, family recognition, or relationship histories. Such evidence motivates comparison of support contexts but does not verify the identity-to-empowerment pathway.

Zhao and Kuang (2026) use two-wave data from 229 single mothers in China to examine communicative resilience through interactions with children, family and friends, and former partners or in-laws. They report distinct associations across these interactions, with both continuity- and change-related processes relevant to mental health. Their contribution challenges the assumption that adaptation necessarily requires abandoning previous meanings. Two-wave observational evidence improves attention to ordering but does not independently establish causality. Communicative resilience remains analytically distinct from the identity reconstruction proposed here.

Moles and Bernardi (2026) analyse 100 biographical interviews with 20 lone mothers in Switzerland and distinguish different vulnerability trajectories across life domains. Their findings challenge a uniform movement from disruption to recovery. For this framework, the implication is to examine divergent configurations of resources and stressors rather than assume that all women pass through one sequence. The trajectories are contextual interpretations, not universal stages or estimates of their prevalence. Their study does not directly test the proposed identity mechanism.

CONSTRUCT DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES

Table 1 provides working definitions and distinguishes adjacent constructs to make the proposed relationships open to examination.

To sharpen the construct boundaries, identity reconstruction is defined by evidence of change, continuity, or renegotiation in self-meanings and role meanings, not simply by a report of feeling strong, using a coping strategy, or obtaining resources. Resilience refers to a pattern or process of adaptation in the face of adversity; it is assessed through adaptation over time and should not be inferred from identity narratives alone. Empowerment refers to perceived and/or enacted agency, including competence, autonomy, influence, and participation in decisions; a woman may reconstruct her identity without gaining actual decision-making power. Coping refers to cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioural efforts to manage specific demands; these responses may occur with or without substantial identity change. Empirically, identity reconstruction would be indicated by accounts of prior role meanings, moments of challenge or reflection, revised or reaffirmed meanings, and consequences for how situations are interpreted or actions are selected. Resilience requires evidence about adaptation under adversity; empowerment requires indicators of agency and influence; coping requires evidence of responses to identifiable stressors. Keeping these indicators separate reduces the risk that the framework will merely rename successful adjustment as identity reconstruction.

Table 1: Conceptual Definitions and Boundaries of Key Concepts

Construct	Working definition	Boundary from adjacent constructs
Role transition	A period of adjustment following a change that alters roles, responsibilities, relationships, routines, or expectations.	The transition is the context or process of change; it is not itself a coping strategy.
Identity reconstruction	Ongoing reflection, negotiation, revision, and integration of meanings through which a person understands herself and her roles after a significant change.	It may include continuity and ambivalence; it does not require a uniformly positive self-view.
Psychological empowerment	Perceived competence, autonomy, influence, and capacity to participate in decisions affecting one's life.	It concerns perceived agency and its enactment, not identity meanings alone.
Adaptive coping	Cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioural efforts used to manage demands in ways that are reasonably responsive to circumstances and goals.	A strategy should not be labelled adaptive solely because it appears positive; context and consequences matter.
Social support	Emotional, informational, instrumental, or appraisal resources available through interpersonal, community, organisational, or institutional	Support may be helpful, insufficient, conditional, intrusive, or stigmatising.

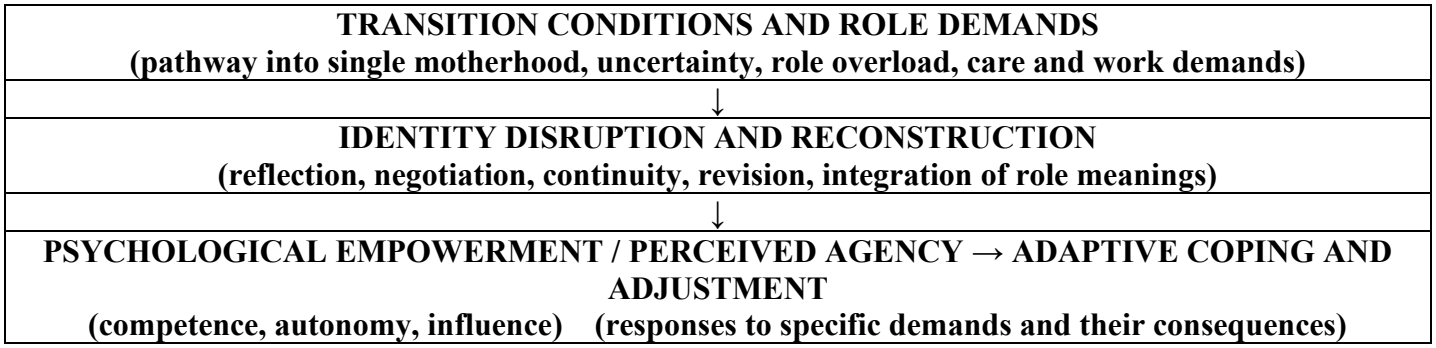
	relationships.	
Structural resources	Material and institutional conditions such as income, housing, childcare, employment flexibility, and access to services.	These are not reducible to individual resilience or social support.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

The framework conceptualises the transition to single motherhood as a context that may prompt identity disruption and renegotiation. Identity reconstruction may contribute to empowerment when revised role meanings support competence, autonomy, and perceived control. Empowerment may, in turn, widen the range of coping responses a mother considers available. Social support and structural conditions may influence each connection, while coping outcomes can feed back into identity meanings over time (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995).

Figure 1 presents the proposed direction of relationships. Transition conditions and role demands are expected to prompt identity disruption and reconstruction. Identity reconstruction may be associated with psychological empowerment, which may broaden the coping responses perceived as available and feasible. Social support is proposed to moderate the transition-to-identity and identity-to-empowerment relationships, while structural resources are proposed to moderate the empowerment-to-coping relationship. Both forms of context may also affect coping directly. Coping experiences may feed back into later identity reconstruction, making the process iterative rather than strictly linear. These are proposed relationships, not empirically confirmed causal effects.

Figure 1. Proposed integrative framework for identity reconstruction and adaptive coping in the transition to single motherhood



Moderating conditions: Social support may strengthen or weaken the transition → identity and identity → empowerment links. Structural resources (income, housing, childcare, employment flexibility, services) may strengthen or weaken the empowerment → coping link. Feedback: coping experiences ↔ later identity reconstruction.

Proposition 1: Transition Conditions and Identity Reconstruction

The nature, perceived controllability, and cumulative demands of the transition are likely to shape the form and intensity of identity reconstruction among single mothers. Transitions involving greater uncertainty or conflict may prompt more pronounced identity renegotiation, although the direction and meaning of this process will vary across individuals and contexts (Schlossberg, 1981).

Proposition 2: Identity Reconstruction and Empowerment

Identity reconstruction that enables a mother to integrate continuity with change, recognise competence, and develop a self-defined account of her role may be associated with stronger psychological empowerment. This relationship is expected to depend on whether social and material conditions provide opportunities to enact the revised identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995).

Proposition 3: Empowerment and Adaptive Coping

Psychological empowerment may support the selection and sustained use of adaptive coping strategies by strengthening perceived agency and confidence in decision-making. However, empowerment may not lead to effective coping when structural barriers restrict the strategies available or when demands exceed accessible resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995).

Proposition 4: Social Support as a Moderator and Enabling Condition

Support that is responsive to a mother's needs and respects her autonomy may facilitate identity reconstruction and strengthen the relationship between identity reconstruction and empowerment. In this framework, social support is also proposed to moderate these relationships: the association may be stronger when support validates the mother's preferred role meanings and provides usable emotional, informational, or practical assistance, and weaker when support is controlling, conditional, stigmatising, or unreliable. Support may additionally reduce demands directly, so its role is not limited to moderation.

Proposition 5: Structural Resources as Moderators of the Empowerment–Coping Relationship

The relationship between empowerment and adaptive coping is likely to be stronger when practical resources, including secure income, suitable employment, affordable childcare, stable housing, and accessible services, make coping actions feasible. Structural resources are therefore proposed to moderate the empowerment-to-coping relationship, while also potentially influencing coping directly. Where these resources are absent, perceived agency may not translate into feasible action. This proposition positions structural conditions as active influences on adaptation rather than background variables only (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024; Danurswari et al., 2024).

Proposition 6: Iterative and non-linear adaptation

Identity reconstruction and coping are likely to influence one another over time. Experiences of successful coping may reinforce a revised identity, while setbacks, new caregiving demands, or changes in social relationships may prompt further renegotiation. Adaptation should therefore be conceptualised as iterative rather than as a fixed sequence with a universal endpoint (Schlossberg, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

DISCUSSION

The framework advances a process-oriented account of adaptation to single motherhood. Rather than treating coping solely as a set of observable responses to stress, it asks how women understand their changed roles and how these meanings may influence the actions they consider possible. Identity reconstruction may help connect the experience of transition with empowerment and coping, but the framework does not assume that all mothers need to adopt a particular identity or that a positive self-narrative is a prerequisite for successful parenting.

First, the framework distinguishes identity reconstruction from empowerment. Identity reconstruction concerns the meanings through which a woman understands herself and her roles; empowerment concerns perceived and enacted capacity to influence decisions and circumstances. The constructs may be related, but they are not synonymous. A woman can develop a coherent identity while continuing to face limited control over employment or finances. Conversely, gaining practical resources may increase autonomy without requiring a dramatic change in self-concept.

Second, the framework treats social support as a multi-route contextual influence. Support can reduce practical burdens directly, validate a woman's identity, provide information, and expand access to resources. This approach is more nuanced than treating support as a single protective variable. It also recognises that social relationships can reproduce stigma or restrict autonomy, making the nature of support as important as its presence.

Third, the model avoids an exclusively individualised explanation of resilience. Single mothers' coping opportunities are shaped by labour-market conditions, childcare provision, income adequacy, housing, legal arrangements, and public policy. Identity reconstruction may support agency, but it cannot substitute for adequate material and institutional resources. This is particularly important for interventions: programmes should not imply that women are responsible for overcoming structural disadvantages through attitude change alone.

Finally, the framework is intended to be sensitising rather than prescriptive. It offers constructs and relationships that future research can examine, while leaving room for cultural variation, different pathways into single motherhood, and divergent experiences of identity. The framework should be refined if empirical evidence indicates that the proposed relationships are absent, conditional, or operate in a different order.

Does Identity Reconstruction Explain Coping or Accompany it?

The central claim must explain something that a demands-and-resources account cannot already explain. A mother who gains reliable childcare may experience less stress, take up employment, and describe herself as more capable. In this hypothetical case, the changed self-description could follow improved coping rather than mediate it. The model is therefore weakened if every favourable narrative is classified as identity reconstruction. Evidence should identify a prior role meaning, its reconsideration, and how the revised meaning changes the interpretation or selection of a coping response. Without that distinction, the framework risks redescribing adjustment rather than explaining it.

The repeated-data findings of McDonnell and Gracia (2024) and the care-penalty account of Li and Zhong (2025) make resource-related explanations especially important. The theoretical inference proposed here is that material improvement, reduced conflict, and identity revision can follow separate or interacting routes. Studies should assess these alternatives rather than assume the identity route because it is the focus of the model. Counterexamples include effective coping with stable self-meanings and substantial identity revision without improvement in practical circumstances.

The Cost of Being Resilient

Coping should not be labelled adaptive merely because essential tasks are completed. A hypothetical mother may maintain work and childcare by sacrificing sleep, health, or valued relationships. This response could protect immediate household functioning while becoming difficult to sustain. Its evaluation therefore requires attention to whose goals are served, the period considered, and the distribution of costs. A positive resilience score cannot settle these questions. The framework distinguishes short-term feasibility, self-defined usefulness, and longer-term consequences rather than treating functioning as an unqualified success.

Recent accounts of coping and unequal care obligations make it necessary to examine the conditions demanding resilience (Ng et al., 2025; Li & Zhong, 2025). Praising endurance can inadvertently legitimise arrangements that leave care unsupported. This is a conceptual critique, not a claim that the cited studies endorse that position. An intervention should be evaluated partly by whether demands become manageable, not solely by whether mothers become more willing to tolerate them. Personal agency and institutional responsibility must remain visible together.

Conditional Support and Recognition

Support has at least two distinguishable functions: reducing a practical burden and recognising a person's preferred role meanings. These functions need not coincide. Relatives may offer childcare while questioning the mother's decisions or provide emotional reassurance without being able to meet practical needs. The first arrangement may enable employment while limiting perceived autonomy; the second may support identity legitimacy without expanding available options. This hypothetical distinction explains why perceived support, received assistance, and freedom to make decisions should not be collapsed into one variable (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cook, 2012).

The communicative evidence of Zhao and Kuang (2026) supports differentiating relationship types, while the model adds a question about the terms of recognition. Can a mother disagree with a support provider without losing assistance or respect? Support that requires conformity may stabilise household functioning while restricting identity work. Conversely, a difficult conversation can clarify boundaries even when it initially increases distress. These possibilities make satisfaction with support an incomplete indicator of its consequences and prevent the model from assuming that more interaction is always better.

Heterogeneity and Culturally Situated Agency

The category single mother describes a family position rather than one psychological condition. Bereavement, conflictual separation, abandonment, and chosen solo parenting may involve different relationships to loss, choice, and recognition. Likewise, low income, disability, children's support needs, and employment conditions may intersect without producing identical experiences. Moles and Bernardi (2026) substantiate the importance of heterogeneous trajectories, but their Swiss findings cannot be transferred directly into Malaysian welfare and kinship arrangements. Comparative interpretation must examine the arrangements through which resources actually become accessible.

Empowerment should consequently be evaluated against self-defined goals and feasible choices. Maintaining kinship obligations can express agency, while financial independence can coexist with isolation. Neither dependence nor independence has a fixed meaning outside the relationship in which it occurs. A critical framework should ask whether a commitment is valued, negotiable, and practicable. It should also allow continuity to be a reasoned outcome. Zhao and Kuang (2026) identify relevance for continuity as well as change, reinforcing the need to avoid treating a dramatically reconstructed identity as the only route to adaptation.

Evidence Standards and Boundaries of Theoretical Integration

Combining four theories is useful only if the integration generates discriminating explanations. Transition Theory organises contextual demands; Identity Theory addresses role meanings; empowerment concerns influence over valued decisions; and support theory specifies relational resources. Overlap remains possible because control, self-evaluation, and recognition may appear in several constructs. Measures should therefore avoid using nearly identical confidence items to assess identity, empowerment, and coping. Otherwise, an apparent relationship could partly reflect measurement redundancy rather than the proposed mechanism (Jaakkola, 2020; Zimmerman, 1995).

The contemporary literature supplies contextual evidence and rival explanations, not validation of a complete mediation model. Qualitative accounts clarify meaning and variation; observational surveys identify associations; repeated observations provide additional temporal information. None should be treated as experimentally established evidence that revising identity improves coping. The framework should remain revisable if practical support explains adjustment more adequately, if empowerment precedes identity change, or if women sustain meaningful lives without reconstructing their self-understanding. These conditions make the contribution testable rather than self-confirming.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The paper offers three potential contributions. The first is a process contribution: identity reconstruction is positioned as a possible mechanism through which role transition becomes connected to empowerment and coping. This directs attention to meaning making and role negotiation rather than focusing exclusively on stressors or coping behaviours.

The second is an integration contribution: four theoretical perspectives are assigned distinct explanatory roles in a single model. This integration clarifies what each perspective contributes and reduces the risk of presenting multiple theories without explaining their relationship.

The third is a contextual contribution: social support and structural resources are treated as conditions that may enable or constrain the translation of identity-related change into coping action. This counters an overly individualistic interpretation and creates a basis for examining variation across socioeconomic and cultural settings. These contributions remain conceptual until assessed through empirical research.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Counselling and Psychosocial Support

Counsellors and psychosocial practitioners may use identity-sensitive conversations to help mothers explore changes in role expectations, retain valued aspects of previous identities, and articulate self-defined goals. In practice, counsellors can ask clients to describe which roles feel disrupted, which remain important, what social labels they experience, and what a manageable future would look like. Goal setting should distinguish changes the mother can influence from barriers requiring practical or institutional intervention. Screening and referral pathways should address urgent needs such as housing insecurity, financial hardship, legal advice, childcare, and safety where relevant. Practice should not prescribe independence or resilience as the only acceptable response; it should allow space for grief, ambivalence, cultural values, and different definitions of a good life.

Community and Peer Support

Peer groups and community organisations can provide confidential spaces for mutual support while linking participants to practical resources. Programmes should be co-designed with single mothers and offer flexible scheduling, accessible venues or online participation, childcare where feasible, and clear confidentiality procedures. Facilitators can combine peer exchange with information about benefits, employment services, legal assistance, parenting resources, and mental-health support. Organisations should avoid presenting a single model of successful single motherhood and should monitor whether participants feel respected, included, and able to make their own decisions. Referral partnerships with local agencies can help ensure that emotional support is accompanied by material assistance.

Employers and Policymakers

Employers can reduce avoidable role conflict through predictable scheduling, transparent leave arrangements, flexible start and finish times where operationally possible, fair access to training and promotion, and clear procedures for requesting temporary adjustments without stigma. Managers should assess performance against job requirements rather than assumptions about a worker's family status, and employee-assistance or referral services should be confidential. Policymakers can strengthen the conditions for coping through affordable and reliable childcare, accessible income and housing support, legal and financial guidance, employment protections, and coordinated service access. Public services should use non-stigmatising language and reduce repeated administrative burdens where possible. These measures should be evaluated not only by service uptake but also by whether they improve practical access, reduce unmet needs, and expand mothers' feasible choices.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual paper, the framework does not establish causal relationships or demonstrate that identity reconstruction predicts coping outcomes. Its propositions are intended to guide inquiry and require empirical testing. In addition, the meaning of single motherhood and the resources available to mothers vary across cultures, legal systems, welfare regimes, and family arrangements. A framework developed through broad theoretical synthesis may therefore need contextual adaptation.

Future research should test the propositions using complementary designs. Longitudinal qualitative studies could interview mothers at several points after transition and around events such as separation, changes in employment, children entering school, or changes in support. Interviews should explicitly elicit prior role meanings, moments of disruption, continuity and revision, and how these meanings influence coping decisions.

Quantitative studies could develop or adapt distinct measures of identity reconstruction, empowerment, coping, social support, and structural resources, establish their discriminant validity, and test the proposed direct and moderated associations. Longitudinal surveys would be preferable to single-wave designs for examining temporal ordering; mediation or moderation estimates should be interpreted cautiously unless the design supports the relevant inference. Mixed-methods studies could first use interviews to refine construct indicators and then test them in a larger, diverse sample, or use quantitative patterns to select cases for follow-up interviews. Cross-cultural comparisons should examine single mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds and family-policy settings, including variation in income, education, employment security, urban or rural location, pathway into single motherhood, and access to childcare and formal services. Such comparisons should test whether the meaning and indicators of identity reconstruction are comparable across contexts rather than assume equivalence.

Across designs, researchers should measure identity reconstruction independently from resilience, empowerment, and coping. A useful qualitative test would seek negative cases: mothers who cope effectively while retaining stable role meanings, and mothers who revise their identities without experiencing improved coping. Quantitative studies should compare the proposed pathway with alternatives in which structural resources or reduced stressors predict coping directly, and in which coping precedes identity change. Sampling and reporting should describe the diversity of participants and avoid treating single mothers as a homogeneous group.

A further priority is to distinguish perceived support from received support and supportive intent from helpful outcomes. Studies should consider whether forms of support reinforce autonomy or create dependence and whether institutional barriers moderate the relationship between empowerment and coping. Cross-cultural research should avoid if individual autonomy has the same meaning or priority in all contexts.

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

A conceptual framework becomes more useful when it specifies not only the expected pathway but also conditions under which the pathway may weaken, change direction, or fail to occur. The proposed model therefore avoids treating identity reconstruction as a guaranteed source of empowerment. A woman may develop a coherent understanding of her new role while still experiencing poverty, insecure work, limited childcare, discrimination, or restricted access to services. In such circumstances, identity-related change may support meaning-making but have limited influence on the practical options available to her.

A second boundary condition concerns social recognition. A revised identity may be personally meaningful but difficult to enact if relatives, employers, institutions, or community members continue to apply stigmatising assumptions. In contrast, recognition from trusted others may validate new role meanings and expand opportunities for participation. The framework therefore treats social support as potentially relevant to both the identity process and the feasibility of coping actions, while distinguishing supportive recognition from social pressure to conform.

A third boundary condition is the pathway into single motherhood. Bereavement, divorce, separation, abandonment, and non-marital childbirth may involve different combinations of grief, conflict, choice, legal responsibilities, and continuing relationships with a co-parent. The framework should not assume that these experiences are equivalent. Empirical studies should identify the pathway into single motherhood and consider how it shapes the timing, meaning, and direction of identity reconstruction.

A fourth boundary condition is time. Identity reconstruction may be more visible soon after a transition, but adjustment can be revisited when children enter school, employment changes, a new relationship begins, or caregiving needs intensify. A one-time survey may capture a snapshot rather than the iterative process proposed here. Longitudinal designs are therefore particularly valuable for examining whether coping experiences reinforce or revise identity meanings.

A final boundary condition concerns cultural expectations. The meanings attached to motherhood, marriage, independence, kinship, and help-seeking vary across settings and communities. The framework does not

assume that individual autonomy is universally the primary marker of empowerment. Instead, future research should examine how women define agency and well-being within their own relational and cultural contexts.

RESEARCH AGENDA

The propositions can be developed into an empirical research agenda that tests both the central pathway and its boundary conditions. The agenda below is intended to guide future research rather than to prescribe a single design.

Table 2: Proposed Research Designs, Evidence Requirements, and Potential Contributions for Future Research on Identity Reconstruction and Coping in Single Motherhood

Research question	Useful design	Possible evidence	Contribution
How do women describe changes and continuities in identity after becoming single mothers?	Longitudinal qualitative interviews	Narratives collected at multiple time points; major transition events; identity language and role meanings	Clarifies the process and temporal pattern of identity reconstruction.
How do family, workplace, and institutional responses validate or constrain revised identities?	Comparative qualitative case study	Interviews with mothers and, where appropriate, support providers; policy and workplace documents	Explains the social recognition and institutional conditions of identity work.
Are identity reconstruction, empowerment, perceived support, and coping associated in the proposed pattern?	Cross-sectional exploratory study followed by replication	Validated measures, contextual variables, and clearly defined sampling criteria	Assesses associations without prematurely asserting causality.
How do structural resources change the relationship between empowerment and coping?	Mixed-methods study	Survey data on income, childcare, work flexibility, and coping; interviews about feasible and infeasible actions	Tests whether material resources condition the proposed pathway.
How do pathways into single motherhood shape transition experiences?	Comparative or life-course design	Accounts differentiated by bereavement, separation, divorce, abandonment, or other relevant pathways	Identifies heterogeneity and avoids treating single mothers as a uniform group.
When does social support become controlling, conditional, or stigmatising?	Critical qualitative study	Accounts of received support, reciprocal obligations, autonomy, and unintended consequences	Refines the model's treatment of support as context dependent.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes an integrative conceptual framework connecting role transition, identity reconstruction, empowerment, and coping among single mothers. Its contribution is to distinguish changes in role meanings from perceived agency and the practical resources needed to act. Recent evidence supports attention to stigma, care burdens, relational resources, and heterogeneous pathways, but does not validate the complete proposed mechanism. Improved coping may follow reduced stressors or practical assistance without substantial identity change, while reconstructed meanings may coexist with restricted opportunities. Social support should therefore be examined for its quality, conditions, and consequences, and coping should be evaluated against self-defined goals and the costs of sustaining it. Empirical assessment should examine competing explanations and both continuity and change. Psychosocial support should accompany institutional measures that make valued choices feasible.

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