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SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN FROM SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES IN NSUKKA AND EZEAGU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Children raised by one parent in Nigeria often face poverty, reduced supervision and emotional strain, yet little is known about which social work services actually reach them. This study identified the major social work interventions on the well-being of children from single-parent families and assessed the socio-economic and psychological challenges these children face in Nsukka and Ezeagu Local Government Areas of Enugu State. Two objectives and two research questions guided the study, which was anchored on Attachment Theory. A descriptive qualitative survey design was adopted. Six communities (Nru, Opi and Obimo in Nsukka; Ihie, Iwollo and Olo in Ezeagu) were selected by simple random sampling, and 120 participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. They comprised children from single-parent families, married women, widows, teachers, social workers and community leaders, together with adults who grew up in single-parent homes. Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions and analysed thematically. Four main interventions were found to reach the children: counselling and psychosocial support, educational and material assistance, case management with referral and home visits, and family counselling with parenting education. Churches, women's groups and community leaders filled gaps in formal provision, but irregularly. The children's well-being was threatened by five linked challenges: household poverty and material deprivation; reduced parental supervision and heavy household or income-earning duties; grief, loneliness and emotional insecurity; low self-esteem arising from stigma and comparison with peers; and anxiety about whether their schooling would continue. Poverty was the starting point of much of the emotional strain, while supportive adults helped some children build resilience. The study concluded that the interventions available match the main dimensions of the children's needs but are uneven in reach. It was recommended that social welfare agencies deliver integrated programmes that combine material assistance with counselling and family support, with individual plans for each child.

Keywords: single-parent families, children's well-being, social work intervention, psychosocial support, poverty, stigma, attachment, Enugu State

Introduction

The family is the first and most important institution for the socialisation of children. Through guidance, supervision, discipline and emotional support, parents teach children the norms and values of their society. Single parenthood, in which one parent raises a child without the day-to-day support of the other because of death, divorce, separation, desertion, migration or birth outside marriage, changes the conditions under which this happens. Around the world, single mothers form the large majority of single parents, which means that women carry most of the responsibility for raising children and for the family's economic survival in these households.

In Nigeria, single parenthood has been linked with a range of psychosocial problems for both parents and children. A review of single parenting in Nigeria identified anti-social behaviour, aggression, poor academic performance, fear, anxiety, hostility and idleness among its effects on children, and stress, insecurity, loneliness, discrimination and depression among its effects on parents (Chia & Terwase, 2016). At the same time, outcomes are not fixed. Single parenting may increase the risk of delinquency, but it does not make delinquency inevitable (Folorunsho et al., 2024), and a study of secondary school students in six Nigerian states found that community support moderated the relationship between single parenting and academic performance (Hiko et al., 2023). International research points the same way. Children whose parents divorce score somewhat lower on average than other children in schooling, conduct and emotional adjustment, but the differences are modest and vary widely (Amato, 2000, 2010), and about half of the disadvantage of children raised by one parent has been traced to the lower income of their households (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). This suggests that what matters is not only family structure but the resources and support around the family.

Social work is the profession most directly concerned with providing such support. Social workers assess family needs, offer counselling, link families with resources, support parents and protect children. In Enugu State, where urban and rural communities face unemployment, poverty and limited social welfare services, these roles are especially important. Yet most available studies treat the educational, emotional and behavioural problems of children from single-parent families separately, and few ask which interventions actually reach these children in local Nigerian settings. Children's well-being is multidimensional, covering their socio-economic, psychological, educational and behavioural circumstances. This paper reports the part of a larger study that identified the interventions reaching children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs and the socio-economic and psychological challenges they face.

Statement of the problem

Children are expected to grow up safe, emotionally secure, physically healthy and supported in their education. In many communities in Enugu State, divorce, separation, widowhood, non-marital births and parental absence have led to a growing number of children being raised by one parent. While many single parents care for their children well, others face economic and emotional constraints that limit their ability to supervise and provide for them. Teachers and community members have raised concern about absenteeism, declining school performance and emotional and behavioural difficulties among children from disrupted family backgrounds.

Social work interventions such as counselling, educational and material assistance, case management and family support are meant to protect these children, but it is not known which of these services actually reach children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs, nor how the children themselves, their parents and those who work with them describe the challenges they face. Without such evidence, social welfare agencies, schools and families

cannot tell whether existing services match the children's needs. The problem of this study, therefore, was to identify the major social work interventions on the well-being of children from single-parent families and to assess the socio-economic and psychological challenges these children face in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs of Enugu State.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to examine social work intervention on the well-being of children from single-parent families in selected Local Government Areas of Enugu State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. identify the major social work interventions on the well-being of children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs of Enugu State; and
2. assess the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs of Enugu State.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the major social work interventions on the well-being of children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs of Enugu State?
2. What are the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs of Enugu State?

Theoretical framework

The study was anchored on Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby. Bowlby (1969) argued that children are biologically predisposed to form close bonds with a primary caregiver and to seek and keep closeness to that person, especially when they are distressed. The caregiver acts as a secure base from which the child explores the world and to which the child returns for comfort. The quality of this bond, shaped by the caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness, influences the child's emotional, social and cognitive development. Ainsworth et al. (1978) later showed that the security of a child's attachment depends largely on how sensitive and responsive the caregiver is. Separation from an attachment figure produces anxiety and protest and, if prolonged, despair and detachment (Bowlby, 1973).

The theory is relevant to this study in three ways. First, it explains why the death of a parent, parental separation or a parent's long absence can leave a child with grief, insecurity and fear of further loss. Second, it explains why the remaining parent's availability matters: when economic pressure forces a single parent to work long hours, the child may lose not only material support but also the responsive presence that sustains emotional security. Third, it points to the kinds of intervention that should help. Counselling and psychosocial support give the child a trusted adult to talk to, while family counselling and parenting education strengthen the remaining parent's ability to respond to the child's emotional needs and so restore the secure base. The theory therefore guided both the identification of interventions and the analysis of the challenges children face.

Methodology

Research design. The study adopted a descriptive survey design using qualitative data collection techniques, namely Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This approach was chosen because the study sought detailed accounts of participants' experiences, perceptions and opinions of social work intervention and the well-being of children from single-parent families, in their own words.

Study area. The study was carried out in Nsukka and Ezeagu Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Enugu State, South-East Nigeria. Nsukka, in the north of the state, is a semi-urban

and urban educational, commercial and administrative centre whose residents work in education, the civil service, trading, farming and artisan trades. Ezeagu, in the west of the state, is predominantly rural, with farming, trading and small businesses as the main livelihoods. The two LGAs were chosen to cover both a more urban, institution-rich setting and a rural setting where access to professional social services is more limited. Their 2025 estimated populations were 475,174 for Nsukka and 262,036 for Ezeagu, a total of 737,210, obtained by bringing the 2022 projections of the National Population Commission and the National Bureau of Statistics forward at 2.28% a year.

Participants and sampling. Six communities were selected by simple random sampling: Nru, Opi and Obimo in Nsukka LGA, and Ihie, Iwollo and Olo in Ezeagu LGA. Within each community, 20 participants were selected purposively for their direct experience of single parenthood, child upbringing or child welfare, giving a total of 120. Snowball sampling was used to reach single parents, widows and adults who grew up in single-parent homes who were not listed in any official record. The participants comprised children from single-parent families, married women, widows, teachers, social workers and community leaders (Table 1), together with adults who grew up in single-parent homes, who gave retrospective accounts of their childhood.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants by Community and Category (N = 120)

LGA	Community	Children	Married women	Widows	Teachers	Social workers	Community leaders	Total
Nsukka	Nru	3	4	3	3	4	3	20
	Opi	2	4	3	3	4	4	20
	Obimo	5	4	3	3	3	2	20
Ezeagu	Ihie	6	4	3	3	2	2	20
	Iwollo	2	4	3	3	4	4	20
	Olo	4	4	3	3	3	3	20
Total	**6 communities**	**22**	**24**	**18**	**18**	**20**	**18**	**120**

Children = children from single-parent families. Source: Field Survey (2025).

Instruments, trustworthiness and data collection. Data were collected with a semi-structured interview guide used for both the KIIs and the FGDs. The guide was reviewed for relevance, clarity, language and coverage by the researcher's supervisor and two other experts in the Department of Social Work, University of Port Harcourt, and their corrections were incorporated. It was then piloted with health officials and social workers in Port Harcourt LGA, Rivers State, outside the study area, which led to minor changes in wording and sequence. The same guide was used in all sessions to keep the questions consistent. Interviews and discussions were held in homes, community centres, schools and offices convenient to participants. Notes were taken and, with participants' permission, responses were audio-recorded.

Data analysis. Recordings and field notes were transcribed and read repeatedly for familiarity. The data were then coded, and codes were grouped into themes under each objective of the study, following the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Only responses that bore directly on an objective were retained. Verbatim quotations are identified by data source, participant category and community, for example (KII, Social Worker, Nru).

Results

The findings are presented under the two research questions. Under each, the themes that emerged are described with illustrative quotations.

Research Question One: What are the major social work interventions on the well-being of children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs?

Five themes emerged, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Major Social Work Interventions and the Dimension of Well-Being Each Addresses

Theme	Intervention	Main dimension of well-being addressed
1.1	Counselling and psychosocial support	Psychological
1.2	Educational and material assistance	Socio-economic and educational
1.3	Case management, referral and home visits	Identifies the dimension most at risk for each child
1.4	Family counselling and parenting education	Psychological, through the parent-child relationship
1.5	Child protection and community-based support	Socio-economic well-being and safety

Source: Field Survey (2025), thematic analysis of KIIs and FGDs.

Counselling and psychosocial support. Counselling was the intervention mentioned most often by social workers and teachers. It gives children an outlet for feelings they would otherwise hide from an overburdened parent. A social worker explained:

> "Some children keep their problems to themselves because they do not want to add to the burden of the parent. When we provide counselling, they have an opportunity to talk about what they are experiencing and learn how to cope with it." (KII, Social Worker, Nru)

A community leader noted that the effects of losing a parent may appear only after some time, so counselling needs to be sustained, and a child in a focus group said: "When somebody talks to you and encourages you, you do not feel that you are alone" (FGD, Child from a single-parent family, Nru).

Educational and material assistance. The second major intervention was help with school requirements and basic needs. A widow described the pressure of school costs on a single parent, and a social worker explained that the aim of such help is to prevent children from leaving school:

> "If the main problem is that the parent cannot afford the child's educational needs, we try to identify available support rather than allowing the child to leave school." (KII, Social Worker, Opi)

A teacher in Ihie added that a child without books or uniform may feel inferior, and that such support makes the child "more comfortable" in class.

Case management, referral and home visits. Social workers described case management as the means of matching services to each child's needs:

> "Every child has a different situation. One may need counselling, another may need school assistance, while another may need medical or protection services. We first assess the situation before deciding what intervention is appropriate." (KII, Social Worker, Iwollo)

Home visits allowed social workers to see living conditions and how the parent related to the children, which an office interview could not reveal.

Family counselling and parenting education. Participants explained that a child's well-being depends on the relationship with the remaining parent. Social workers helped parents understand "the difference between discipline and punishment" and encouraged communication with the child (KII, Social Worker, Nru). A married woman summed up the need:

> "Children need food and school fees, but they also need somebody to listen to them. When parents are always busy trying to survive, they may not notice when a child is emotionally troubled." (KII, Married Woman, Nru)

Child protection and community-based support. In all six communities, churches, women's groups and community leaders supplemented formal services and watched for children at risk of exploitation. However, an adult who grew up in a single-parent home recalled that such help "depended on who was willing to help. A proper social welfare system would have made the support more regular" (KII, Adult raised by a single parent, Iwollo).

Finding One: The major interventions reaching children from single-parent families are counselling and psychosocial support, educational and material assistance, case management with referral and home visits, and family counselling with parenting education. Community-based support fills gaps in formal provision but is irregular. Each intervention addresses a different dimension of the children's well-being.

Research Question Two: What are the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs?

Economic hardship and material deprivation. Economic hardship was the challenge reported most often. A widow described having to choose "whether to buy food or pay for something required in school" (KII, Widow, Olo). A social worker observed that many presenting problems trace back to poverty:

> "A child may come with an educational problem, but when you investigate, you discover that the parent cannot afford the child's school requirements." (KII, Social Worker, Nru)

Reduced supervision and heavy household responsibilities. Participants did not describe single parents as neglectful but explained that the need to earn a living reduces time with the child. Older children were often drawn into trading or farming. An adult who grew up in a single-parent home recalled:

> "I had to help with household responsibilities from a young age. It taught me responsibility, but there were times when it affected my studies and left little time for rest." (KII, Adult raised by a single parent, Iwollo)

Grief, loneliness and emotional insecurity. Where single parenthood followed a parent's death, participants described lasting grief that might show as silence or anger. A widow said that after her husband died, "One became very quiet while another became angry" (KII, Widow, Olo), and a social worker warned: "We cannot assume that a child who is not crying is not affected" (KII, Social Worker, Ihie).

Low self-esteem and stigma. Children compared themselves unfavourably with classmates, and comments from others led them to hide their circumstances. An adult who grew up in a single-parent home explained:

> "There were times when I felt different from my classmates. It was not only about money. It was also about the fact that other children could talk about both parents while I could not." (KII, Adult raised by a single parent, Ihie)

Anxiety about the future. Children worried about whether their schooling would continue if the only provider could no longer cope. Not all accounts were negative, however.

One participant said that growing up with one parent "was difficult, but it also taught me to work hard and appreciate what I have" (FGD, Adult raised by a single parent, Nru).

Finding Two: The well-being of children from single-parent families is threatened by five linked challenges: poverty and material deprivation; reduced parental supervision and heavy household or income-earning duties; grief, loneliness and emotional insecurity; low self-esteem arising from stigma and comparison with peers; and anxiety about the continuation of schooling. Poverty is the starting point of much of the emotional strain, while supportive adults enable some children to develop resilience.

Discussion of findings

The first finding is that four main interventions reach children from single-parent families in the study area, supported by irregular community help. The prominence of counselling and family counselling reflects Attachment Theory's emphasis on the child's need for a responsive adult and a secure base (Bowlby, 1969). Counselling provides a trusted adult outside the home when the parent is overburdened or grieving, while parenting education helps the remaining parent become more available to the child. The finding that family communication matters is consistent with Anyamene and Odo (2025), who found that parenting styles and family communication patterns significantly predicted students' academic achievement in Enugu State. The reliance on churches, women's groups and community leaders supports the observation of Hiko et al. (2023) that community support can soften the effects of single parenting, but the irregularity of that support shows why it cannot replace formal services. A study of widows in rural Enugu State similarly found that they received no pension or government welfare and relied mainly on religious groups and charities (Ugwu et al., 2020), which underlines how thin formal provision is in the state.

The second finding is that children from single-parent families face five linked socio-economic and psychological challenges, with poverty at the root of much of their emotional strain. The central place of poverty is consistent with McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), who attributed about half of the disadvantage of children raised by one parent to low household income, and the stigma described by participants mirrors the ostracism and social exclusion reported by widows in rural Enugu State (Ugwu et al., 2020). The finding also agrees with Chia and Terwase (2016), who identified fear, anxiety, aggression, hostility and poor academic performance among the effects of single parenting on Nigerian children, and with Jackson et al. (2010), who found that higher parenting stress among poor single mothers was associated with more behaviour problems in their children. The finding that grief may show as silence as well as anger reflects Bowlby's (1973) account of protest, despair and detachment following separation from an attachment figure, and the lasting nature of these difficulties is consistent with Hetherington and Kelly (2002), who found that a minority of children of divorce experience serious emotional and social problems.

The accounts of resilience among adults who grew up in single-parent homes are equally important. They support Folorunsho et al. (2024), who cautioned that single parenting raises risk without making poor outcomes inevitable. Taken together, the findings suggest that family structure is a context of vulnerability rather than a fixed cause of harm, and that the resources and support available to the family largely decide how children fare. As a qualitative study with purposively selected participants in two LGAs, its findings describe participants' experiences and are not intended to be generalised statistically to all of Enugu State.

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Conclusion

The study concludes that counselling and psychosocial support, educational and material assistance, case management with referral and home visits, and family counselling with parenting education are the main social work interventions reaching children from single-parent families in Nsukka and Ezeagu LGAs, with community-based support filling gaps irregularly. These interventions correspond to the main dimensions of the children's needs. The children face linked challenges of poverty, reduced supervision, grief, stigma-related low self-esteem and anxiety about their education, with poverty at the root of much of their emotional strain. Interventions are therefore most likely to help when they address material and emotional needs together and are delivered regularly rather than by chance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Enugu State Government, through its social welfare agencies, should fund integrated programmes for children from single-parent families that combine educational and material assistance with counselling, psychosocial support and family support.
2. Social workers should develop an individual intervention plan for each child, based on case assessment and home visits, so that services are directed at the dimension of well-being most at risk.
3. Social welfare agencies and non-governmental organisations should provide parenting education and family counselling that help single parents attend to their children's emotional needs despite work pressures.
4. Single parents, especially widows and economically disadvantaged mothers, should be supported with vocational training and income-generating programmes to reduce household poverty.
5. Local government authorities should formalise links with churches, women's groups and community leaders so that community support for children from single-parent families becomes regular and coordinated with professional services.

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