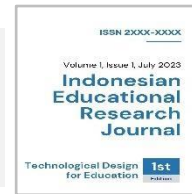




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Factors Influencing the Educational Achievements of Students in Single-Parent Mother-Headed Families: A Critical Study on Selected Secondary Schools in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The family unit is a crucial social agent, and the issues may negatively affect students' education. This study aims to identify the factors that influence the education of students from single-parent, mother-led families in selected secondary schools within the Kegalle Educational Zone. The survey method was utilized in this research, with the questionnaire serving as the primary source of data collection for respondents. A sample size of 30 participants was chosen using a combination of simple random sampling and purposive sampling. The data was analyzed using percentage statistical methods to draw meaningful conclusions. The findings of this study indicate that low educational attainment among single mothers, combined with financial hardships and limited resources, negatively impacts their children's academic performance. Addressing these challenges through targeted support and resource provision is crucial to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Keywords: Single parent, Mother-headed family, educational achievement

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is a foundational social institution that plays a critical role in the socialization and development of children. As noted by sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, the family functions as the primary agent of socialization, shaping individual behavior and maintaining societal cohesion (Ganiyeva, 2022). This influence becomes particularly pronounced in single-parent households, especially those headed by mothers, where the maternal figure often assumes full responsibility for the child's emotional, social, and educational development (Teleoac, 2025). These families, while frequently confronted with financial constraints and limited access to resources, also demonstrate considerable resilience and adaptability. Vygotsky's theory of social development emphasizes the importance of social interaction and supportive environments in learning processes, providing a valuable lens through which to understand the impact of maternal support on children's academic success (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011).



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In recent decades, the traditional two-parent family structure has evolved, giving rise to diverse family configurations due to divorce, separation, non-marital births, or the death of a spouse (Chima Abimbola Eden et al., 2024; Chavda & Nisarga, 2023). Single-mother-headed households are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic challenges that can significantly affect children's academic trajectories. Despite these obstacles, parental engagement through homework supervision, school involvement, and communication with teachers has been shown to enhance educational outcomes (Lee et al., 2007; Sharma, 2024). Moreover, single mothers often compensate for limited resources by creating nurturing home environments and leveraging community networks (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Thi Vu, Kate Huppatz, 2021). Cultural values and maternal education further influence children's learning engagement, particularly in countries such as Sri Lanka and Vietnam (Careemdeen, 2024; Thi Vu, Kate Huppatz, 2021). Nonetheless, systemic barriers and societal perceptions may restrict their capacity for involvement (Stitt, 2013; Azumah et al., 2018). Parental involvement remains a pivotal factor in shaping children's educational success, especially when adapted to local contexts.

Educational achievement is not merely an individual endeavor; it reflects broader societal structures, including access to opportunities, family stability, and institutional support (Coetzee, 2023). While existing literature has addressed various determinants of academic performance, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific experiences and challenges of students from single-mother-headed families in Tamil-medium secondary schools in Sri Lanka's Kegalle Zone. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the socio-economic and educational dynamics affecting students in this demographic.

Focusing on Tamil-medium schools in the Kegalle District of Sri Lanka's Sabaragamuwa Province a culturally diverse and socioeconomically varied region, this research explores the lived realities of children from single-mother-headed households, which are increasingly prevalent due to divorce, widowhood, and spousal abandonment. Many of these children are enrolled in local schools, yet their unique educational challenges remain underexplored. Drawing inspiration from (Udisi & Stephen, 2016) findings in Nigeria, which highlight intergenerational effects of socio-economic disadvantage, this study contextualizes similar dynamics in the Sri Lankan setting.

The primary objective of this research is to identify key factors that influence the educational achievement of children living in single-mother-headed households. Specifically, it investigates three dimensions: (1) the impact of the mother's educational level on her children's academic outcomes; (2) the extent to which maternal occupation influences educational support; and (3) the role of household income in facilitating educational needs and performance. Through this focus, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how maternal socio-economic characteristics shape children's academic trajectories in single-parent contexts.

Beyond academic inquiry, this research contributes to discussions on educational equity, social inclusion, and national development. Given the rising number of single-parent households in Sri Lanka, particularly those headed by women, there is a pressing need to understand and respond to their educational challenges. Insights from this study will help inform targeted policies and practices that empower students from single-mother families to achieve academic success and broader socio-economic stability.

2. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research approach, specifically using a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. This approach was selected due to its effectiveness in systematically gathering measurable data from a large sample, allowing for statistical analysis and generalization of

findings (John W. Creswell, 2018). The quantitative method is particularly suited for identifying patterns and determining the extent of relationships between variables, in this case, the influence of maternal factors on children's educational attainment in single-mother-headed households. Three key research questions guided the design of the questionnaire: (1) How does a mother's education level influence children's educational attainment?, aimed at identifying whether maternal education impacts academic outcomes; (2) How much does a mother's occupation contribute to children's educational attainment?, which examines the role of maternal employment in shaping children's academic success; and (3) How much does a mother's household income influence children's educational attainment?, focused on assessing the financial capacity of the household as a contributing factor. Each question was operationalized through relevant indicators in the questionnaire to ensure alignment with the respective objectives and enable accurate data analysis (Babbie, 2020; Bryman, 2016).

Simple Random Sampling (SRS) to select participants from the target population of single-mother students enrolled in Tamil-medium schools in the Kegalle region. The sampling frame comprised all eligible students identified across five selected schools. With the assistance of school principals and vice-principals, a comprehensive list of students meeting the criteria (i.e., from single-mother households where the mother had received formal education) was compiled. Thirty (30) participants were then randomly selected from this list using a random number generator, ensuring each student had an equal probability of inclusion (Kissh, 1965; Cochran, 1963).

A total of thirty (30) participants were included in this study, with six (6) students selected from each of the five schools to ensure proportional representation across the region. Simple Random Sampling (SRS) was employed to minimize selection bias and enhance the representativeness of the sample concerning the specialized population (Fowler, 2014). This methodology is consistent with best practices for making unbiased inferences about well-defined and finite populations (Kissh, 1965).

The data collected has been thoroughly analyzed and compiled according to the following parameters. A questionnaire was administered to students to examine the factors influencing the academic achievements of those from single-mother households. The data obtained from the questionnaire was then subjected to rigorous data analysis to draw meaningful conclusions. The data that was gathered underwent statistical analysis

Data Tool

A structured questionnaire was employed to achieve the research objectives and collect relevant data. For the first objective, which focuses on the impact of the mother's education level on the child's academic support, three specific indicators were assessed: (1) the extent to which the mother's education level assists in helping the child complete homework, (2) the influence of the mother's education level in selecting an appropriate study environment at home, and (3) the role of the mother's education in motivating the child towards academic pursuits. The second objective explores the effect of the mother's occupation on her involvement in the child's education. This is measured through three indicators: (1) whether the mother's work responsibilities create time constraints that limit her educational engagement, (2) whether the nature of the mother's occupation affects her ability to support her child's schooling, and (3) whether the mother's place of work has any bearing on her involvement in the child's education. The third objective investigates the influence of the mother's income on the child's education and is examined using four indicators: (1) whether the mother's income positively contributes to the child's educational outcomes, (2) whether the household has sufficient income to cover school expenses as needed, (3) the adequacy of the mother's income to purchase necessary school supplies, and (4) whether the mother's income is generally sufficient to meet the child's overall educational needs. These carefully formulated questions are intended to yield comprehensive and meaningful data, directly aligned with the research goals and enabling robust analysis of the factors influencing children's education.

Analysis Method

The present study utilised a statistical percentage method to analyse the gathered data. This technique allowed for quantitative data analysis, which facilitated the identification of patterns and trends. This rigorous analytical approach ensured objectivity and accuracy in the interpretation of the data. The analysis demonstrates that the statistical percentage method is a useful tool for interpreting data in educational research

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a summary of data analysis and interpretation based on responses from a survey conducted on a sample group. The study focused on basic information, and the following parameters were considered:

1. Gender Distribution: The sample population comprised 30% males and 70% females.
2. Geographic Distribution: The respondents were distributed across different regions: 16.66% in cities, 33.33% in villages, and 50% in garden areas.
3. Mother's Occupation: The respondents' mothers were involved in various occupations, with 66.66% working in the wage industry, 16.66% being self-employed, 6.66% working in private companies, and 3.33% not working. Only 6.66% of mothers worked in the government industry.

These findings provide valuable insights into the demographics of the sample group and can be used to make informed decisions for future research or business strategies.

How a mother's education level influences children's educational attainment

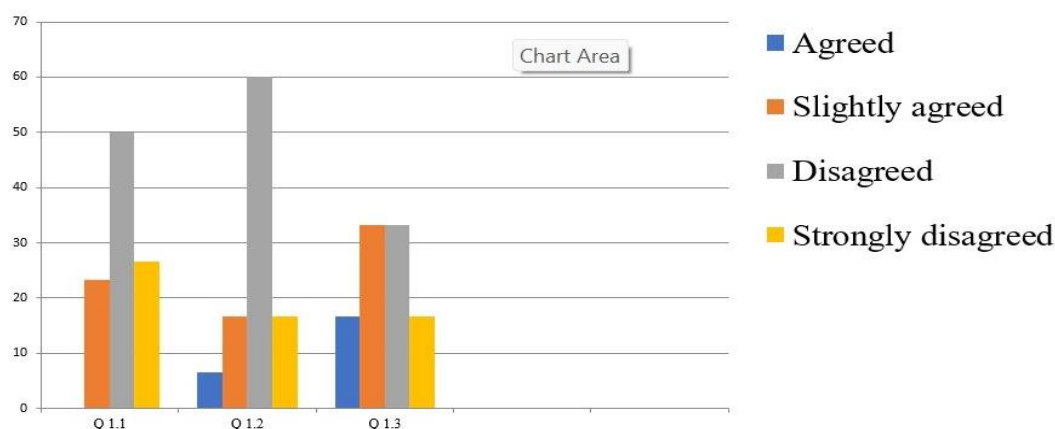


Figure 1. How a mother's education level influences children's educational attainment.

According to the data presented in the table above, 50% of the surveyed students disagreed that their mother's level of education is significantly helpful in completing their homework. In comparison, 26.6% of students said they had never agreed with this statement. In contrast, 73 students have accepted the statement above.

Additionally, only 16.63% of the surveyed students agreed that their mother's education level is highly influential in selecting an appropriate study environment. Moreover, 33.33% of the respondents somewhat agreed with this statement, while the remaining 33.33% of students disagreed. In contrast, 16.6% of students have never accepted this statement.

Lastly, 16.6% of the respondents agreed that their mother's educational level plays a crucial role in motivating them, while 33.3% of students somewhat agreed and 33.3% disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, 16.6% of students have never agreed with this statement.

The findings of this study elucidate a modest perceived influence of mothers' educational levels on the academic experiences of students residing in single-mother-headed households. Notably, a majority of students did not strongly correlate their mother's educational attainment with direct academic support mechanisms, such as homework assistance, motivational support, or the conducive nature of the home study environment. While a minority acknowledged some degree of influence, a significant portion expressed disagreement or neutrality, suggesting that alternative factors, such as emotional support, economic stability, and school engagement, may play a more pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes.

This observation resonates with existing literature that emphasizes the primacy of parental involvement over mere educational attainment in affecting academic achievement. Research highlights that active engagement in children's education, manifested through support with homework, participation in school activities, and open lines of communication, correlates with improved academic outcomes, particularly within single-mother households (Lee et al., 2007). Moreover, Sharma reinforces this perspective by asserting that such engagement enhances students' motivation, self-esteem, and sense of belonging within the school environment, thereby underscoring the importance of the quality of parental involvement rather than the educational qualifications of the parent (Sharma, 2024).

Additionally, the contextual challenges faced by children in single-parent families, including economic adversity, reduced guidance, and emotional deprivation, can significantly impede their academic progress (Rubamande et al., 2021). These broader structural and psychosocial factors may eclipse the influence of maternal education alone, indicating that effective academic support within single-mother households must be contextualized within a comprehensive socio-economic and emotional framework.

How Mother's occupation contributes to children's educational attainment.

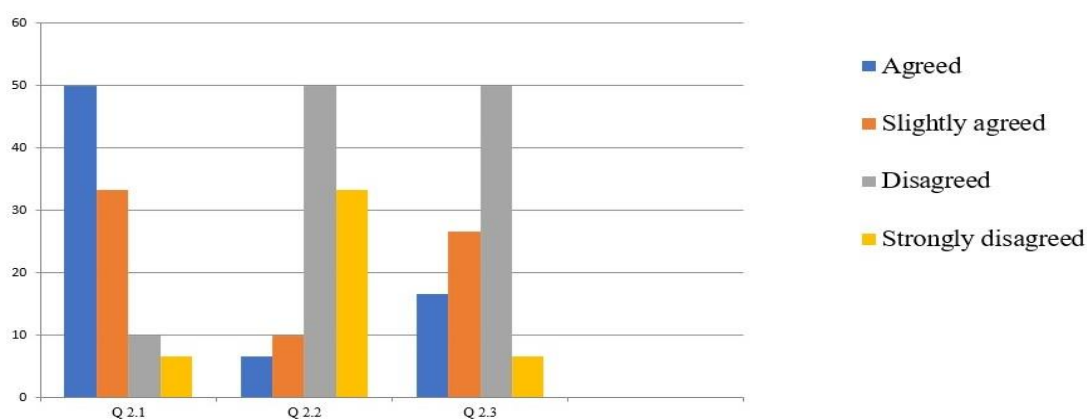


Figure 2: How Mother's occupation contributes to children's educational attainment

The present study investigates the impact of a mother's occupation on students' academic achievement from single-parent families. The study population comprised students who expressed their views on how their mothers' profession affects their academic performance.

Results indicated that 50% of the participants agreed that their mothers' occupation creates a time constraint that hinders their ability to engage in academic activities. In comparison, 33.33% of the

students slightly agreed with this statement. However, 5 students (approximately 16.67%) did not accept this proposition, while 6.63% never agreed.

In response to a question about whether a mother's place of work positively affects their educational engagement, 6.6% of the students agreed, 10% slightly agreed, and 50% disagreed. Three students (33.3%) expressed strong disagreement with the statement.

Moreover, 16.6% of the students agreed that their mothers' working period did not interfere with their involvement in their educational activities, while 26.6% of the students slightly agreed with this statement. However, 50% of the students did not support this proposition, and 6.6% of the students expressed partial disagreement with it.

The results of this investigation illuminate the intricate and layered perceptions held by students originating from single-mother households regarding the impact of maternal employment on their academic performance. The spectrum of responses, ranging from negative to neutral to positive, underscores the multifaceted nature of maternal employment within the context of single-parent family dynamics. This variability in student viewpoints is consistent with broader empirical research suggesting that the occupational status of single mothers can significantly influence their children's educational trajectories through both direct and indirect mechanisms.

For instance, Jennie E Brand (2014) demonstrated that job displacement among single mothers notably detracts from children's educational attainment and psychosocial well-being, particularly affecting older children and those whose mothers are less prone to job loss. These findings are analyzed through frameworks of social stigma and relative deprivation, indicating that children's academic engagement is shaped not only by economic stability but also by the socio-emotional and symbolic dimensions associated with their mother's employment status.

Likewise, Milne & Ginsburg (1986) indicated that the negative ramifications of maternal employment and single parenthood on academic achievement are contingent upon various contextual factors, including age, race, and family structure. Collectively, these studies emphasize the necessity of acknowledging the diversity within single-parent families and advocate for nuanced policy interventions that take into account both structural disadvantages and individual resilience in influencing educational outcomes.

How Mother's household income influences children's educational attainment.

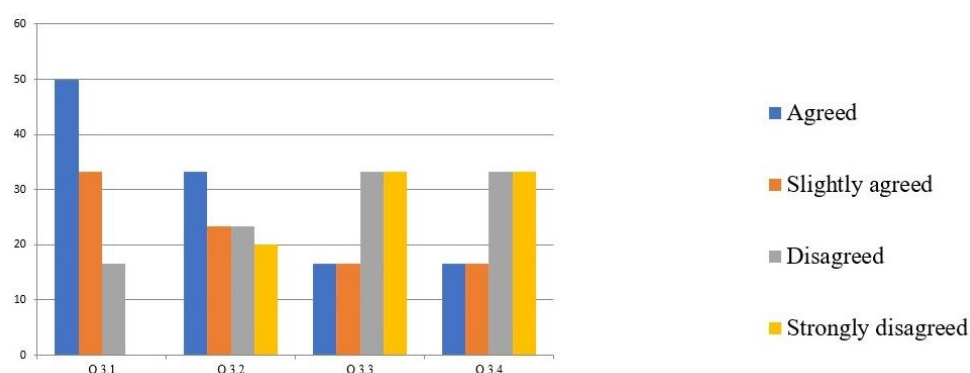


Figure 3: How Mother's household income influences children's educational attainment

Upon analyzing the impact of a mother's income on the academic accomplishments of students in single-mother households, it was found that 50.3% of students concurred that their mother's higher income had a positive influence on their education. 33.33% of students expressed a slight agreement, while 16.63% of students did not agree.

In addition, 33.33% of students agreed that their mother paid school fees as and when required, while 23.33% of students slightly agreed. In contrast, 23.33% of students disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed. Furthermore, 16.63% of students agreed that their mother's income was adequate to purchase school supplies, and a similar proportion (16.63%) slightly agreed. 33.33% of students decided to some extent, while 33.33% of students did not agree.

Finally, it was found that 16.63% of students agreed that their mother's income was sufficient for their schooling, with a further 16.63% of students expressing a slight agreement. On the other hand, 33.33% of students disagreed, and an equal percentage of students, i.e., 33.33%, strongly disagreed.

The findings of the study illuminate the complex interplay between maternal income and the educational experiences of children within single-mother households. A significant portion of students recognized a positive correlation between their mother's income and their educational outcomes; however, many also reported ongoing financial challenges, particularly concerning school-related expenses such as fees, books, and supplies. This duality highlights the economic vulnerabilities that single-mother families experience and underscores the need for systemic interventions aimed at alleviating financial barriers to educational access.

These insights are consistent with existing literature, which consistently identifies household income as a critical determinant of children's academic success. For instance, (Khoso, et al. 2021) indicates that enhanced financial resources in single-mother households correlate with improved educational outcomes, as increased economic stability facilitates access to necessary academic support mechanisms. In a similar vein, (Cooper & Stewart, 2021) present robust empirical evidence that illustrates the causal relationship between household income and children's cognitive, social-behavioral, and health outcomes, thereby reinforcing the argument that financial capital plays a pivotal role in enhancing educational trajectories.

The synthesis of these findings underscores the necessity of socioeconomic support structures that can mitigate the detrimental impacts of poverty on education, particularly in contexts involving vulnerable family configurations.

The mother's educational level directly influences the educational attainment of students in single-mother families. Research indicates that a low educational level of the mother can contribute to lower learning levels for the students. Additionally, as a single mother, the nature of her work may limit her ability to provide adequate support for her children's learning. In such cases, the duration of the mother's working hours is less likely to be conducive to the student's academic progress.

Furthermore, a single mother's family income is often low, which can significantly impact the availability of learning equipment and transportation for students. This lack of resources may further exacerbate the challenges faced by students in single-mother households and hinder their education.

In summary, single mothers' low educational level, coupled with financial constraints and limited resources, can have a detrimental effect on their children's academic achievement. As such, providing adequate support and resources to address these challenges and promote equal educational opportunities for all students is essential.

4. CONCLUSION

The following study analyses the educational attainment disadvantage faced by students who are raised by single mothers, highlighting the multifaceted challenges these families encounter. The research suggests that the mother's educational level has a significant influence on her children's academic performance and motivation, indicating that higher educational qualifications can lead to a more enriching home environment. In addition to education, the nature of the mother's occupation, the

workplace dynamics, and the variability in working hours also play crucial roles in shaping students' educational outcomes. These factors contribute towards either facilitating or hindering the academic growth of children. Furthermore, the study reveals that low family income, which is often a reality for many single-mother households, casts a shadow on educational opportunities, leading to disparities in access to resources such as tutoring, extracurricular activities, and technology. Ultimately, this research aims to identify strategies for enhancing the academic achievements of students from families headed by single mothers, advocating for policies that support both educational access and economic stability.

Recent research highlights the significant benefits that students from single-mother households can derive from enhanced support systems within schools, particularly from teachers. These households often contend with financial limitations and reduced access to educational resources, which may hinder students' academic performance. To mitigate these challenges, educators are encouraged to adopt targeted strategies such as mentorship programs, after-school tutoring, and sustained communication with both students and their families. Such tailored interventions can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, ultimately promoting improved academic outcomes.

In addition, addressing the financial barriers these students face requires active involvement from school administrators and teachers in promoting access to scholarships, grants, and financial aid. Partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and community leaders can further expand these opportunities. Facilitating access to educational resources not only empowers students to pursue higher education and better career prospects but also contributes to their families' long-term financial stability. These proactive measures underscore the importance of equitable education policies and reflect a broader societal obligation to support all students, regardless of their family background.

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