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SINGLE MOTHERS EMPLOYED IN THE FORMAL WORK SECTOR IN GERMANY AND SOUTH AFRICA

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This article seeks to disrupt the dominant discourses of victimhood related to single-mother family status. Drawing on a sustainable livelihood framework, we present data from in-depth interviews held with 25 single mothers sampled in Hagen, Germany, and in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces in South Africa. We discuss how participants engaged in positive human capital development, building social capital and tapped into multiple income streams for economic security. Given the intersectional injustices that single mothers face, the strengths the women drew on in their lives is worth noting. We conclude that single mothers have created a new narrative for themselves beyond a pathological one.

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**Key words:** single mothers, sustainable livelihoods, human capital, social capital, economic capital, economics, experiences

## ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS OF SINGLE MOTHERS EMPLOYED IN THE FORMAL WORK SECTOR IN GERMANY AND SOUTH AFRICA

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### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times both in the Global North and Global South the dominant discourse of the nuclear family as the primary institution to provide stability and security for household members has been a frame of reference. Two historical events in Germany and South Africa serve as points of insight into single-mother households in this article. For South Africa the year 1994 marked the historical new beginning of the post-apartheid era, while the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of West and East Germany in the context of broader European integration were similarly dramatic events for Germany. In 2017 Germany was ranked fourth in international comparisons of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while South Africa was ranked 33rd according to estimates of the International Monetary Fund (2018). Even if a comparison of national GDP can be viewed critically, it nevertheless shows that economic prosperity significantly differs between the two countries with, among other things, consequent challenges for women striving for economic independence and better access to jobs in the formal work sector. Empirical evidence reveals that the proportion of single-parent households has increased in Europe and Africa (Amaoteng, 2007; Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Raniga & Mthembu, 2016). This is of particular interest to social workers as single-mother households have a much higher vulnerability to poverty, economic insecurity and psychosocial stresses compared to two-parent households. In the post-1994 era in South Africa, 44.6% of children live in single-mother households that are predominantly dependent on government cash transfers (Statistics South Africa, 2016). An overview of international research on the economic experiences of single mothers reveals a multitude of distinct personal, social and political factors that influenced and played a prominent role in their survival strategies (Broussard, Alfred & Thompson, 2012).

Furthermore, with rising poverty and inequality, there is much concern about whether public policies are focusing on the changing dynamics of family structures and the wellbeing of single-mother households in particular. Gatter (1984) found that in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland no significant reduction in formal employment was evident amongst single mothers caring for children under the age of 3. This was ascribed to state legislation which facilitated maternity benefits, parental leave, support for childcare through tax policies and access to publicly-subsidised childcare facilities. Evidently, appropriate government legislation and support to facilitate a better

balance of domestic and work responsibilities for single mothers with minor children suggest the need to examine similar state legislation in Germany and South Africa.

Bearing the above deliberations in mind, in this paper we disrupt the dominant discourse of victimhood associated with single-mother family status and to fill an empirical gap in understanding the economic experiences of single-mother households. We present the narratives of 25 single mothers who reflect on the many rewards and affirmations that make this family status desirable and affirming of their motherhood roles. Our study was motivated by two primary assumptions. First, while single mothers employed in the formal work sector in Germany and South Africa have been primarily conceptualised as part of disabled family structures at increased risk of unemployment and unsustainable income, insufficient attention has been given to how this form of family status sustains their households. The central premise of this paper is that single mothers have not necessarily succumbed to social stigma and a pathological frame of reference; instead, they have been able to make this family status desirable, rich and affirmative with possibilities, which has contributed to them becoming stronger to cope in times of stress and adversity. Second, we have argued that single mothers have tapped into different streams of economic capital, which has helped sustain their households during times of adversity.

Given the intersectional injustices that single mothers face – such as economic insecurity, food insecurity and social discrimination based on this family status – the strengths and resistance evinced in their daily lives is affirming and worth noting. Such an examination of single mothers' new narratives may help realign social workers to move beyond a pathological focus and instead embrace a sustainable livelihood approach to reducing economic insecurity in these households (Bourdieu, 1976).

### **SINGLE MOTHERS AND EMPLOYMENT IN GERMANY AND SOUTH AFRICA**

In contemporary times an important factor relevant to both South Africa and Germany regarding the evolution of the family is the increasing economic independence of many women, single mothers in particular (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2014; Peukert, 2012; Träger, 2009). According to the Federal Statistical Office (2017), 23% of the total population is comprised of single-parent households, 15% of which are single-father households. Furthermore, in Germany the number of single mothers working in the formal work sector has risen by about 5%, from 65.5% to 70.1%, in the last 10 years. Even though it is a good 10% below the employment rate of single fathers, this is a high value compared with the Republic of South Africa. Moreover, in 2018 the employment rate of single mothers in the formal work sector was 3% higher than that of women in couple households (Federal Statistical Office, 2017). The trend analysis reveals an increase in single-parent households mainly in urban formal communities compared to rural areas. Zagel and Hübgen (2018) found in a comparative study of various European welfare states that the difficulties associated with single-mother family status is the interplay between inadequate resources, poor access to job opportunities and inadequate policies to support domestic and child care responsibilities. In addition, single mothers often experience economic insecurity through wage inequality, precarious low-paid contract jobs, political and social stigma (Ajandi, 2011); (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

In South Africa the trend towards more single-parent households over the past decade is similar to that in Germany. The fertility rate of mothers in South Africa is 2.46 children, which is a much lower rate than the African average (4.6) fertility rate (Raniga & Mthembu, 2016).

In the African context, researchers such as Amaoteng (2007), Nkosi and Daniels (2007) and Raniga and Mthembu (2016) have pointed out that traditional African family structures persist despite the effects of the migrant labour system and the reduction of the extended family to single-mother households. This is not surprising because, despite all the changes and diversification in the post-apartheid era, the impact of colonial policies and the influence of missionaries cannot be underestimated (Mayer, Metzger & Wilhelmi, 1985) as it was a strategic objective to impose European norms and values and replace existing economic and social structures with European standards (Gatter, 1984). Raniga and Mthembu (2016) argue that some of the key factors for the rising number of single-mother households

are accelerated urbanisation, economic globalisation and fluid inter-province and inter-country migration movements, which implies that biological fathers are frequently absent and are no longer part of the nuclear family system. Holborn and Eddy (2011) add that in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, 40% of minor children aged 0 to 17 live only with their mother. Furthermore, this trend can be observed in Sub-Saharan countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia, where the number of single-mother households has increased as a result of poverty, unequal opportunities in the labour market and the dire mortality rate of biological fathers as a consequence of AIDS (Frye, 2007; Sewpaul & Pillay, 2011; Vreeman & Gramelspacher, 2013). It is clear that in both Germany and South Africa single-mother households have increased over the past 30 years, which can in part be traced back to similar factors (industrialisation) and in part to very different factors (AIDS). Evidently past empirical evidence on single-mother family status (Härkönen, 2018; Jaehrling, Erlinghagen, Kalina, Mumken, Mesaros & Schwarzkopf, 2011; Lenze & Funcke, 2014) in both the Global North and Global South has had a distinct pathological focus. Ajandi (2011:410) argues that “single-mother families challenge the dominant paradigm of heteronormativity found within the notion of traditional nuclear family households”.

This article explores the opportunities and strengths of single-mother households in South Africa and Germany, and comparatively discusses three essential forms of capital that the participants noted as necessary for household sustainability: positive human capital development initiatives, building social capital, and tapping in multiple income streams for enhanced economic capital.

### **RELEVANCE OF THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD APPROACH**

The sustainable livelihood approach can provide a valuable organising framework for social workers seeking to reduce vulnerability to poverty and economic insecurity in single-mother households (Raniga, 2016). This is enshrined in the developmental social welfare approach, where female-headed households are encouraged to set up economic cooperatives as intervention strategies to improve their social and economic profile and reduce poverty (Raniga, 2018). Writers such as Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have discussed the integration of five major assets necessary to sustain livelihoods in poor households and that will contribute to building stronger and socially cohesive communities. The first asset is human capital, which includes work experience, skills, knowledge and creative capabilities of people. The second asset is natural capital, which refers to resources such as access to land, water, agriculture and minerals. The third asset is physical capital, which includes food, livestock, jewellery, equipment and machinery. The fourth asset is financial capital, which refers to money earned through working in the formal or informal economy, investments and savings in the bank or state social grants. The fifth asset is social capital, which was conceptualised by Putnam (2000) as social bonds, voluntary associations and quality of relations among people within communities. Bourdieu (1976, 1983) argues that there is a close connection between these kinds of capital and that economic capital can influence social capital, which refers to the networks and associations that facilitate one’s economic, social and human life experiences. Bourdieu also warns that not all networks and associations can advance one’s economic and social goals. Instead the cultural capital (social status) of families depends on access to education, advanced access to higher education, which leads to meeting human capital aspirations and eventually contributes to upward mobility and one’s status in society. Bourdieu (1976) argued further that cultural, economic and social capital contribute to symbolic capital and that this is a cyclical process which advances the growth and development of members of a household. Households are viewed as being sustainable if they can adjust to threats without compromising their future ability to survive shocks to their livelihoods.

In the Global South the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) shares a conceptual synergy with the social development paradigm as a key poverty-reduction strategy in communities. Patel (2015: 242) noted that in contemporary South Africa SLA has been widely advocated as a means to improve the livelihood outcomes of single-mother households through “increasing income, reducing vulnerability, strengthening social networks, improving resources and opportunities for a more sustainable

household”. The SLA is structured on the basis of principles of people-centredness, social justice and human rights. The approach is aligned to the pillars of social development, namely partnership, economic self-reliance, holism and dynamism. Nel (2015) argues that households adjust to their physical, social, economic and natural environments through a focus on this set of livelihood capitals designed to protect the household from shocks during times of crisis, such as the adjustment from a two-parent-income household to a single-income household.

SLA also shares conceptual synergy with other theories such as resilience, asset-based community development and the strengths perspective in that the focus is on mutual trust, norms and community networks, which are perceived as key features of social life that facilitate or ease social interactions encouraging people to work together towards shared goals ((Van Breda, 2018; Wissing & van Eeden, 2002). This framework implies that single-mother households should be able to mobilise their members to reduce the risk of dysfunction and support optimal adaptation. Wissing and van Eeden (2002) also point out that resilience is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic interaction between risk and protective processes. One does need to be mindful that this does not imply that single-mother families are expected to adapt and fit into the status quo and to structural systems that are beyond their control; the women in this study revealed the potential for disrupting the dominant discourses of victimhood related to single-mother family status.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative, descriptive design was employed for the study. According to Rubin & Babbie (2009:134), descriptive design is concerned “with conveying what it’s like to walk in the shoes of people being described – providing rich details about their environments, interactions, meanings and everyday lives”. This approach afforded the single mothers the opportunity to speak authoritatively about their economic experiences and their life choices that led to sustainable livelihoods while employed in the formal work sector in South Africa and Germany.

### **Selecting the participants**

As applicable to a qualitative methodology, the researchers employed non-probability snowball sampling to select the single mothers from middle-class income backgrounds. Sarantakos (2005) maintains that a limitation of non-probability sampling is that it does not ensure representation, as it is not based on statistical randomness and thus cannot be generalised. A critical part of the research process comprised a literature review of single-mother households which focused on the nexus of sustainable livelihoods, gender and economic relations.

The researchers networked with women’s clubs, government departments and community-based organisations in order to obtain access to single mothers who were from middle-class income backgrounds. A letter detailing the research process and its purpose was given to respective gatekeeper organisations in the target areas of Hagen, Germany, and Durban and Johannesburg in South Africa for the purposes of identification of participants from their case records. Each researcher worked in these respective target areas, as familiarity of the locality and ease of accessibility to single mothers who worked in the formal work sector were key motivations for the choice of these target areas. As stated by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006), snowball sampling comprises recruiting participants from places where they are easily accessible and where subsequent referrals were made. The criteria for inclusion in the sample were as follows:

- The women resided in an urban community;
- The women had been employed in the formal work sector for at least one year;
- The women were heads of their households;
- The women were responsible for the care of children;
- They were willing to participate in the study.

The initial three women from each of the respective research communities were interviewed and they referred the researchers to other single mothers based on the criteria for selection. The advantage of this sampling method was that it allowed the researchers to understand and utilise the support networks of these women in their resident communities (Marlow, 2011). The researchers were committed to understanding the unique life experiences of each of the women within their social and economic life situations – thus recognising their individual circumstances while affirming their collective solidarities (Baines, 2007).

### **Data-collection method**

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect the narratives of the single mothers. Throughout the data-collection process, the researchers adopted a dual role as empathic listener, providing de-briefing and support when necessary, and as “observer and minimal participant”, while interacting casually during the interview process (Morris, 2006). Hence we engaged with the women in a genuine, open and egalitarian manner about their economic experiences and their role as single mothers (Marlow, 2011). One interview session was conducted with a total of 25 single mothers from KZN and Gauteng (SA) and in Hagen until data saturation was reached in both countries (Baines, 2007). It must be acknowledged that even though 18 interviews were conducted in South Africa and 7 in Hagen, this did not influence the outcomes of the study.

The semi-structured interview gave the researchers an opportunity to explore whether the participants were willing to share their life stories and to establish them as equal partners in the research process (Baines, 2007). Secondly, it provided a platform to engage the women in understanding their biographical profiles and experiences within the broader socio-economic and gendered framework. Each woman’s narrative shared during the interviews provided insight into how they rose above adversities such as economic insecurity, social stigma and isolation, and the profound impact that doing so had on their household sustainability. The average duration of the interviews was 1.5 hours. The advantage of the interviews was they provided a platform for the participants to answer questions in a safe environment of their choice, in their own terms, avoiding bias and providing room for in-depth information, thus creating a new narrative for themselves and their children.

The following questions were used as a guide in the interview process:

- What psychosocial stressors do you experience as a single mother?
- What are your economic experiences?
- What are your support systems that help you cope as a single mother?

### **Ethical considerations**

An ethical clearance letter was received from the Research and Ethics Committee at the respective institutions for higher education and all the women signed informed consent forms during the interviews. It was also agreed that no names would be used in the reporting of the findings. Permission was also obtained to tape-record all interviews. Member checking, a method to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, was applied in this study. The researchers kept detailed field notes and used multiple peer reviews of the transcripts and field notes to reduce subjectivity and biases on the part of the researchers (Marlow, 2011).

### **Data analysis**

In the data-analysis phase, the authors were guided by Marlow’s (2011:64) ethnographic summary, which refers to a ‘systematic coding for qualitative data’. The authors used this approach to move back and forth between the raw data and the transcripts in order to gain more abstract insight into the emergent themes that would go into the final research report. The data were thematically and critically analysed in relation to relevant literature and sustainable livelihood theory. The authors were constantly mindful of interpreting the single mothers’ experiences in relation to sustainable livelihood theory (Bourdieu, 1976). Marlow (2011) makes an important point that the process of moving from data capturing to immersion, conceptualisation

and theorisation of the data is the most tedious yet distinctive aspect of qualitative research. Three key themes that are closely connected and that were distilled from the data analysis are discussed in this article, namely, positive human capital development, building social capital, and tapping into multiple income streams for enhanced economic capital.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The empirical findings presented emerged from the analysis of one semi-structured interview conducted with each of the 25 single mothers, as well as from the consensus discussion between the researchers on the analysed data.

The discussion on the findings will be presented in two sections:

- A biographical profile of the participants; and
- A discussion of three closely connected themes, namely positive human capital development, building social capital, and tapping into multiple income streams for enhanced economic capital.

Table 1 presents the biographical profile of the participants.

**TABLE 1**  
**BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE GROUP OF SINGLE MOTHERS**

Participant number	Age	Sector of employment	Place of residence	Number of dependents in household	Highest level of education
1	38	Police service	Umlazi	3	Grade 12
2	27	Depart of social development	Bizana	1	Masters degree
3	41	Department of Health	Mandeni	1	Degree
4	37	Health clinic	Esiphahleni	4	Diploma
5	31	Dept of social development	Durban	2	Degree
6	40	Mining company	Phalaborwa	2	Masters degree
7	50	University	Pretoria	2	Masters degree
8	41	University	Durban	3	Masters degree
9	42	Private company	Parkmore	1	Grade 12
10	41	Self-employed	Hillbrow	1	Diploma
11	49	Self-employed	Windsor west	2	Diploma
12	43	Self-employed	Westdene	3	Degree
13	37	Motor Industry	Fourways	1	Degree
14	54	Self-employed	Victory Park	2	Diploma
15	46	Motor Industry	Centurion	2	Masters degree
16	41	Self-employed	Randburg	4	Masters Degree
17	50	Mall	Woodmead	1	Diploma
18	49	Health consultant	Radiokop	0	NQF Financial services
19	60	Welfare organisation	Hagen	1	Degree
20	51	Welfare organisation	Dortmund	1	Degree
21	32	Welfare organisation	Dortmund	1	Degree
22	33	Welfare organisation	Hagen	4	Degree
23	34	Clinic	Dortmund	1	Grade 10
24	28	Welfare organisation	Dortmund	1	Grade 12
25	21	Law firm	Hagen	1	Grade 10

Table 1 reveals that 3 of the single mothers were aged between 25 and 30, 8 were between 31 and 40, 11 were between 41 and 50, and 3 were between 51 and 60 (N=25). The average age was 30 years. Two of the single mothers in Hagen, Germany had completed Grade 10 in secondary school, while 3 had completed Grade 12. It was commendable that 20 (80%) of the South African single mothers had completed a post-secondary qualification. Twenty-one stated that they were the sole income earners in their household, while 4 had adult children who were contributing to the income of the household. All the single mothers were heads of their households and were responsible for an average of 1.8 (N=25) dependants. An interesting finding is that 5 of the South African women were self-employed and worked on a freelance basis. The other 20 single mothers were employed either in government, higher education institutions or the private sector.

In the following section we will discuss the three interconnected themes, namely: positive human capital development, building social capital, and tapping into multiple income streams for enhanced economic capital.

### **Positive human capital development**

For the purposes of this study, positive human capital development refers to investment in education, training and self-empowerment choices to enhance earnings and job opportunities in the formal work sector (Becker, 1994). As illustrated in Table 1, 20 (80%) of the 25 women had a tertiary qualification, which enabled them to access well-paying jobs in the formal work sector. All the women stated that the choice to invest in their education helped to enhance their self-confidence and human capital development. The majority of earlier literature in South Africa and Germany focused on social protection policy measures that were implemented to facilitate cash transfers to single mothers. However, the limitation was that the menial income received from the state child support grant in South Africa placed severe restrictions upon single mothers who wanted to pursue post-secondary education (Raniga & Mathe, 2011). In this study the participants noted that post-secondary education was perceived by their line managers in their respective work sectors as a necessity and that their decision to pursue long-term education had improved their human capital development and upward mobility in the formal work sector (Ajandi, 2011). Hence it was not surprising to note from Table 1 that 20 (80%) of the women had secured well-paying jobs in either government, the private sector or higher education institutions. In both Germany and South Africa there is much empirical evidence that attaining post-secondary education results in higher income security for single-mother households (Härkönen, 2018; Raniga & Mthembu, 2016).

A further finding worth noting was that participants 10, 11, 12, 14 and 16 were South African single mothers who had opted to leave their well-paying jobs in the private sector to work as freelance consultants in the fields of art, social welfare and health. These women stated that the primary reason for this radical decision was to have a better balance of their work and child care responsibilities. One of these woman commented: *“I have the flexibility to attend school activities and be there for my kids. I am able to balance my mother and work responsibilities better”*. Bourdieu (1976) states that the combination of the different types of capital has a profound influence on the habitus of the individual and the striving for a sustainable livelihood. They believed that this life choice served them well when working on contract and they described the consequent changed economic stability as positive for their self-perception, confidence and relationships with their children. These human capital benefits also had a positive impact on their children’s education as all these self-employed women were able to send their children to private schools.

The women made the following comments:

*“I work hard to put my career forward so that I can be self-sufficient.”* (Participant 10)

*“My strength lies in myself. Move past victim mentality.”* (Participant 12)

*“I love the freedom to make my own decisions.”* (Participant 14)



*“Being a staff nurse you work with diverse people .... It helped me to love and respect people, to forgive and be a good mother.”* [‘ubazi abantu’ loosely translated as *ubuntu*). (Participant 11)

*“Well, I think it is important to have a certain standard of living as well as the role-model function, by somehow making advancements, by doing something and by pursuing education.”* (Participant 16)

The comments made by the women corroborate the findings of previous research conducted by Nieuwenhuis and Maldonnado (2018) which concluded that there is a close correlation between women’s level of education, access to employment and economic security. All the women were proud to be single mothers, because it gave them the liberty to live life on their own terms. They were able to be the sole decision-maker and raise their children with their own values. However, the participants also acknowledged with disappointment that a key barrier associated with single-mother family status is social stigma. Along these lines, all of the single mothers in Germany and 7 of the participants from South Africa stated that they struggled with balancing home and work responsibilities. These single mothers who were working full-time had to count on support from domestic helpers, friends and/or extended family members for child-care (Martin & Alber, 2015). This corroborates the findings by Ajandi (2011), who revealed that single mothers’ quest for independence contributed to elevating their self-efficacy and self-esteem. As Bourdieu (1976) postulated, the habitus of a person is incumbent on making positive life choices for improved access to education and enhanced human capital and this correlates with economic and social capital development. The theme of building social capital to create connections with others is explored further in the discussion below.

### **Building social capital**

Empirical studies have sufficiently proven that social capital and networks have a significant influence on the life situation and coping strategies of single mothers (Zagel & Hübgen 2018). Although all participating single mothers explicitly pointed out that they were the sole decision-maker for the family and that they often felt isolated and lonely; they acknowledged that they were able to draw on a broad network of social connections in their home and work environments, which helped them to build their own social capital (Putnam, 2000). All the women indicated that they could count on immense support from their own parents, friends and other single mothers in the community. Five of the South African single mothers who were self-employed stated that they could count on domestic helpers who played the role of nannies when they had to work late. What was interesting was that the participants from Germany primarily drew on social networks from their nuclear family members, while the participants from South Africa drew on support from extended family members and friends. A key aspect of building social capital for all the participants was the connections and social networks created through their work environments, irrespective of whether the single mothers had full-time positions in the formal work sector, or were self-employed and worked on a freelance basis. The women shared following sentiments:

*“Well, I perhaps had the advantage that during the job interview I got along very well with the woman, who became my boss back then, and that we are still friends today.”* (Participant 21)

*“For me as a person it was a very important aspect to be able to work and interact with other people.”* (Participant 25)

*“Don’t be afraid to lean on those around you.”* (Participant 7)

*“I have benefited from my projects in term of self-development, in terms of international exposure and in terms of linkages with prominent people in the field.”* (Participant 14)

Thirteen of the South African single mothers in this sample spoke about the ability of single mothers at work to pool their strengths, identify opportunities to support motherhood activities and build social

networks within the school environment; this often signalled the difference between psychosocial stressors and greater home and work balance and household stability. These women also acknowledged the immense support and care that older women (grandmothers, older siblings, aunts) who were living with them in the household played in respect of taking care of children. These single mothers were able to work flexible hours without the stress of childcare responsibilities. These experiences often provided the motivation for these single mothers to share their life experiences and offer non-judgemental support to other single mothers in the community.

The theme of tapping into multiple income streams for enhanced economic capital is discussed further in the next section.

### **Tapping into multiples income streams for enhanced economic capital**

Twelve of the single mothers in South Africa and 4 of the German participants shared that they struggled financially to meet their household expenses every month. Some of the women commented:

*“In the beginning it is about juggling – over-developed sense of responsibility, I will make a plan.”* (Participant 2)

*“It is a constant struggle, but I have kept my head above water.”* (Participant 9)

*“I had to learn to be financially independent.”* (Participant 5)

*“It was quite a challenge to get financially independent.”* (Participant 9)

*“It was partly very painful and badly stressful to provide the financial means for the wishes of my child.”* (Participant 22)

The findings revealed that 21 (82%) of the women were the sole income earners in their households. What was also clear in the interviews was that despite their financial struggles, all the women had made conscious choices to strive to become economically self-reliant. They admitted that in the beginning it was not easy to adjust to one salary to sustain the expenses in their households. The comments reflect that they were determined to move beyond the victimhood mentality and that they strove to meet their monthly household expenses through tapping into multiple streams of income for enhanced economic capital. These included contract work outside of the formal work sector and/or working overtime at their respective places of employment. In addition, 22 of the women revealed that they received maintenance payment from the biological fathers, even though the majority of these single mothers were of the view that this income was menial to meet the material needs of the children.

It was commendable that all the self-employed single mothers mentioned that did not struggle financially and that through multiple work contracts they had sufficient economic capital to meet their monthly household expenses. They no longer perceived themselves as victims of externally controlled structures and circumstances, rather as acting subjects who can change both their own lives as well as the lives of their children. Participant 10 commented: *“I don’t become a victim. This is a liberating space for me and the difficult times made me stronger.”*

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In both the Global North and South the role of single mothers has evolved beyond victimhood to include a new narrative which is pivotal to maintaining critical household sustainability. A key research question that guided this study was: How do single mothers who were employed in the formal work sector and who head families sustain their households? We discussed how participants engaged in positive human capital development initiatives, focused on building social capital to create connections with others, and tapped into multiple income streams to achieve economic security. All the women possessed remarkable strengths and a sense of independence, and had built positive social networks within and outside their work contexts. Inspired by sustainable livelihood theory, this study identified attributes central to household sustainability, where single mothers spoke about their choices for pursue post-secondary education and the drive to create a new narrative of single motherhood that challenges

society's dominant pathological view. The findings of this study corroborate the argument in Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018) that enhancing economic, social and human capital initiatives reduces vulnerability to poverty and facilitates sustainable livelihoods among single-mother households, which is the foundation for building strong families. The empirical evidence shows that the complexity of single-mother family structures is indeed the norm in Germany and South Africa.

The challenges facing single-mother households cannot effectively be solved by the state, civil society organisations and/or the private sector alone, but require the empowering and consciousness-raising spaces of single mothers enabling them to move beyond victimhood. A further challenge lies with social workers and policy makers integrating the sustainable livelihood approach in transformative interventions, as the ultimate goal is to improve the economic security of single-mother households with children. In the context of this study, transformative interventions refers to improvement of social work practice based on empirical evidence where research becomes a tool for social change (Baines, 2007). Based on these conclusions a number of recommendations are made.

- Transformative interventions should include implementing therapeutic support groups with single mothers to help them to deal with psychosocial stresses, to enhance support networks in the community, and to invest in self-empowerment life choices, as this would ultimately lead to positive human capital development.
- It is important to relate social development activities to include social entrepreneurship training with single mothers to enhance economic security and reduce vulnerability to poverty.
- It is imperative that policymakers, social workers and gender activists lobby for access to microcredit and loans for single mothers who engage in informal employment.
- Effective awareness campaigns to inform single mothers about their legal rights for more equal distribution of wealth and assets are necessary.
- This study represented a limited sample of 25 single mothers of mixed race profiles from middle-class backgrounds in Germany and South Africa. The researchers recommend that further quantitative and qualitative research be conducted with single mothers who work in the informal economy in Germany and South Africa.

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