

# Single Motherhood Inflicted by Increased Widowhood and Divorce Amid Corona Virus Pandemic: Reflections to Reduce Women's Vulnerability

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## ABSTRACT

There has been an evident increase in cases of widowhood and divorce, leading to single motherhood during the Corona Virus pandemic. Data on the global scale shows how men, as a group, have been more vulnerable to death during the pandemic due to the disease and health issues caused by socio-economic problems during pandemic. Existing literature also shows how the divorce rate has surged during the pandemic, mainly due to the lockdown, especially among young couples. This research is built on feminist ontology, and the departure point of this research is the assumption that 'vulnerability' is interdependent and relationally constituted. This study explores the vulnerabilities of young and middle-aged Pakistani women, who experienced widowhood or divorce during the pandemic, making them single mothers. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants selected using the snowball sampling technique combined with purposive sampling. The participants were from various cities in Pakistan, including Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi. Findings of our study reveal that most of the participants lost the traditional security network that they had before becoming single mothers, which increased their vulnerability to not only health problems, but also to social, economic issues. Building on our in-depth analysis, we offer the following recommendations: (i) to build safety networks for women who are single mothers; (ii) to introduce income support and/or public work initiatives to provide income-generating opportunities to women who are single mothers; (iii) to help owners of small-businesses re-establish their business after the change in their marital status; and (iv) to offer 'Single Mother Health Cards' to women who become single mothers to offer them health-related benefits on no/low cost.

**Keywords:** Corona Virus Pandemic; Single Motherhood; Vulnerability; Gender Inequality; Widowhood; Divorce;

## Introduction

The Corona Virus pandemic, which emerged in 2019 and has changed various mutations till today, has continued to have repercussions at all levels. The magnitude of the visible repercussions is beyond the management capability of states, therefore demanding international collaboration and empathy. Although the direct threat of the Corona Virus pandemic is to health, the pandemic has proved itself to be a

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tripartite crisis, having both short-term and long-term consequences on -besides health- society and the economy (Pak et al., 2020). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has regarded the pandemic as the "worst economic downturn" after the great depression in 1929-1239 (see Gopinath, 2020).

While the health and economic loss induced by the Corona Virus pandemic is quantifiable and has been the center of debate on various national and international platforms since its outbreak, the social consequences of the pandemic seem to be undermined in most of the policy responses. The pandemic has affected people and their lives relentlessly, increasing suffering and poverty and leading to a huge social crisis. The disease has not only hit people physically, but also social structure has been hit to its core (Černikováitė & Karazijienė, 2021). The pandemic has affected the world in hundreds of ways, and people belonging to every demographic background have been affected one way or the other. Nevertheless, every other disaster, the Corona Virus pandemic, has also had adverse effects on the vulnerable population of the world as compared to the stronger populations (Ajaz, 2021). Statistics reveal that among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable segments of society affected adversely by the Corona Virus pandemic are those living below the poverty line, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, children, women, and the LGBTQ community. A United Nations (2020) report claims that the vulnerabilities of mentioned communities have increased due to restricted mobility, unemployment, stigma and prejudice against them, and lack of social support.

Another vulnerable group that seems to have emerged amid the Corona Virus pandemic is single mothers, who became "single" due to widowhood or divorce during the pandemic. For women, who have lost their husbands during the pandemic, the social isolation has quadrupled their grief and suffering to an unbearable level (see, for example, Febrianto, 2021; Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2021; Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder, & Brown Speights, 2021; Taylor, Bailey, Herrera, Nair, & Adams, 2021). This paper seeks to gather in-depth data from women who had become single mothers during the Corona Virus pandemic because of widowhood or divorce and aims to raise their concerns at the policy level.

### ***Research Questions***

The foundations of the present research lie in the assumption that there has been an increase in widowhood and divorce during the Corona Virus pandemic. The same has inflicted single motherhood, increasing women's vulnerability. The present research seeks to answer the following overarching research question:

*"How the Corona Virus pandemic has inflicted single motherhood due to an increased surge of widowhood and divorce, how has becoming a single mother during the pandemic increased women's vulnerability in Pakistan, and what lessons can be drawn to reduce women's vulnerability?"*

We have broken down the overarching research question into the following three sub-questions:

1. How has the Corona Virus pandemic inflicted on single motherhood caused by widowhood and divorce?
2. How did becoming a single mother during the Corona Virus pandemic increase women's vulnerability in Pakistan?
3. What lessons can be drawn to reduce the vulnerability of single mothers during the Corona Virus pandemic?

The literature review in the next section answers the first sub-question. In contrast, sub-questions two and three have been answered using primary data in the results section and the section on recommendations for policy and practice, respectively.

## Literature Review

The life expectancy of women and men during the Corona Virus pandemic has decreased worldwide, claims a report by researchers of Glasgow (Hanlon et al., 2020). A meta-analysis of literature by Abate and colleagues (2020) was conducted to find sex differences in testing positive for Corona Virus disease. The analysis revealed that in every ten Corona Virus positive patients worldwide, 5.5 were males, while 4.5 were females. Adams (2020) highlights that in Pakistan, 72% of Corona Virus positive cases during the first six months of the pandemic in 2020 were male. Wenham, Smith, and Morgan (2020) have compared the Global Health data of 2020, claiming that Corona Virus positive cases and the death rate due to Corona Virus disease were high among men in 89 countries.

In addition to the above, comparing the death ratio among genders during the Corona Virus pandemic, recent statistics from China reveal that the world has seen more deaths among men than women (Guan et al., 2020). The same statistics were confirmed later by researchers from the United States of America (Goyal et al., 2020) and South Korea (Kim et al., 2020).

Although it seems too early to establish a gender gap in death rate, various scholars from natural and behavioral sciences have identified some genetic and behavioral factors behind this identified gender gap, that is, a positive correlation between ACE 2 protein in human cells and their sex (Zhao et al., 2020), as well as different behavioral patterns between women and men like, -among other patterns-, patterns of washing hands, staying at home (Galasso et al., 2020).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in the city of Wuhan in China, there have been various epidemiological and clinical pieces of research that claim that besides age, pre-existing health conditions, for example, hypertension, obesity, and diabetes increase the risk of death among the patients (Jordan, Adab, & Cheng, 2020). However, global data suggests that as compared to women, men are more vulnerable to illness and death induced by the Corona Virus pandemic (O'Leary 2020; Bwire 2020).

Survey findings from the three most severely affected countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy, highlight a change in the daily life of people, leading to consequences on personal and family level (Ruppanner, Brandén, & Turunen, 2018). The data reveal that redistribution of household work during the lockdown imposed to prevent the spread of Corona Virus disease has increased shared housework responsibilities among couples, including childcare (ibid). However, despite shared household responsibilities, there is also ample evidence in available literature to establish that due to the lockdowns imposed to retain the spread of Corona Virus, divorce rate, especially among young couples has surged worldwide (see, for example, Rovetta and Castaldo 2020; Biroli et al. 2021).

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of the present research trace back to Fineman's (2010) theory of vulnerability. The main takeaway of her theory is that every human being is vulnerable; therefore, every human being is prone to inter-dependency, and the responsibility of reducing and compensating for their vulnerability is not on themselves; rather, the responsibility lies on the state.

This research is built on feminist ontology, and the departure point of this research is the assumption that 'vulnerability' is interdependent and relationally constituted. This assumption contradicts with traditional 'Vulnerability Theory,' which assumes that vulnerability is 'universal, constant, complex, and particular' (see, for example, Kohn 2014). We assume that traditional vulnerability theory, in its broader sense, cannot help policymakers in making decisions about resource allocation with limited resources. Vulnerability theory also does not suggest how vulnerable communities can be prioritized in budget allocation, therefore, making it harder than usual to differentiate between competing needs because it emphasizes the universality of vulnerability.

However, the notion of Fineman's (2010) theory of vulnerability is relevant to this research because the theory emphasizes that the state has to be responsible for reducing and compensating for the vulnerabilities of their citizens is a part of the theoretical underpinnings of the present research. Fineman's vulnerability theory digs base for social welfare as an expansive governmental responsibility, but at the same time, this theory has flaws too. For instance, a major criticism on this theory is that it fails to be a prescriptive tool to help with identifying how various governments should respond to specific vulnerabilities of individuals and communities.

Despite acknowledging this limitation, we claim that this limitation does not mean that the concept of "vulnerability" cannot be employed to structure specific public policy interventions. On the contrary, vulnerability can prove to be a viable characteristic, upon which policy decisions are based. Therefore, Fineman's vulnerability theory may be a useful construct to structure social welfare policy. Suppose policies are to target individuals successfully based on their vulnerability. In that case, it will be critical to shift the focus beyond stereotypes and presumptions about who is or is not vulnerable to a particular problem to an evidence-based understanding of social needs and risks.

## **Methodology**

To explore the vulnerabilities of single mothers during the Corona Virus pandemic, especially those who became single mothers amid the pandemic due to the death of husbands or divorce, we have used a - qualitative- Feminist approach to this research for data collection in interpretation. The reason behind using the qualitative approach is that widowhood, divorce, and single motherhood are identities and experiences that have emotional connotations and are sensitive. Feminist researchers spread across the last two decades (e.g., Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Hall, Stanley, & Wise, 2006; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004) have emphasized using non-positivistic research methods to explore sensitive topics dealing with vulnerable groups, for example, women, to get in-depth insights.

To select and access the participants, we used the snowball sampling technique combined with purposive sampling since our participants were "hard to reach" and the topic was sensitive (see Ajaz, 2022). The first participant was selected through purposive sampling technique through a personal reference. Then the participant was requested to nominate another participant with similar demographics experiencing widowhood or divorce during the Corona Virus pandemic. Data were collected for seven months between January 2021 and July 2021. We developed a semi-structured Interview guideline in English to guide data collection, which was then translated into Urdu before conducting the interviews. In-Depth Interviews [IDI] were conducted and transcribed in Urdu language and then translated into English using the "Parallel Transcription Method" following Nikander's (2008) framework. Questions related to demographic background, preliminary questions about participants' lives before separation from their husbands through death or divorce, and experiences during the Corona Virus pandemic were included in the interview guideline. In contrast, the flexibility of interview guidelines allowed us to go deeper into questions that seemed significant.

A sum of six single mothers participated in this research who were widowed or divorced during the Corona Virus pandemic. All of them had a child(ren) before the pandemic. Among the participating women, four became widows amid the pandemic, whereas two were divorced. Their age, professions, and levels of education varied. The interviews were held either via teleconferencing or face-to-face. The participants were from Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi. Although we had initially planned to conduct interviews with fifteen single mothers, we observed that many women were not prepared to discuss their vulnerabilities due to trauma induced by widowhood and divorce and the stigma associated with both identities. Therefore, we had to suffice with six participants for this paper; however, we intend to build further on this data at another time.

To maintain the participants' anonymity, each was given an identifying number. Since it is a sensitive research topic, we assured to minimize potential harm to our participants through social criticism and family disputes by maintaining strict anonymity. The interviews were audio-recorded; however, it was

made sure that no names were recorded on the recorder. Verbal consent to participate in the research was sought and granted by all the participants, and they were duly informed that their participation in this research was voluntary. They could opt out at any moment without any need for clarification. Since all the participants were above 18 years of age, any additional permissions were not required from their parents or guardians.

The interviews started with general questions about day-to-day life being a single mother, other family members, and their roles and responsibilities, and the nature of the relationship with the child(ren), and then the conversations moved towards personal questions about their relationship with ex/late husband, and their share of responsibilities, similarities, and differences in experiences of motherhood and 'single' motherhood, problems faced after becoming single mothers, including financial problems and problems at work, and if any support is available from formal or informal networks. Questions were also asked about health issues, including mental health problems adjoining single parenthood and their coping/management strategies. The open coding method was used to start the data analysis process following the guideline of Williamson, Given, and Scifleet (2018).

## **Results and Discussion**

Using the open coding method, we initially got 14 themes, which were then merged to arrive at three main themes, i.e., (i) traditional security network, (ii) economic vulnerability, and (iii) health vulnerability. We have discussed the main findings of this research under each theme in the following subsections.

### ***Traditional Security Network***

The data show that women, who became single mothers during the pandemic, seemed to have lost their traditional security network and became more vulnerable to other social, economic, and health-related vulnerabilities. Even in cases where the traditional security network was available, a few of the participants mentioned that while the existence of a social network that offers help and support was crucial for them being single mothers, the extent to which such networks imposed negative sections instead of positive support was problematic for them. Such negative sanctions have not been sufficiently documented in existing literature, which is a big gap in knowledge and a reference point for further research.

The findings of this research also show that the participants, when they became widows or divorced during the Corona Virus pandemic, felt insecure and reported a lack of trust in the social network that they used to think was safe and "secure" in the presence of their husbands. Research participants indicated similar fears and insecurities for their children, especially those with a daughter(s).

According to the participants, their vulnerabilities became so obvious and open that they felt unsafe in such situations. Due to their loneliness, many single mothers fear being alone and seem to have lost their self-esteem and self-confidence as a result. The loss of personal contact and their tendency to socially withdraw due to stigma and lack of time increases their vulnerability. Some participants reported immediate family members as their only "safe" social network, whereas a few participants also reported "friends" and "colleagues" as their primary security network.

### ***Economic Vulnerability***

Becoming single mothers through widowhood or divorce brings additional economic responsibility to women, increasing their vulnerability. Extra economic hardships are evident through the housing and food crisis/ insecurity in Pakistan, which quadrupled during the Corona Virus pandemic. The participants living in rented houses mentioned that the rent burden makes them even more economically disadvantaged than the others, increasing their vulnerability and their children's vulnerability by pushing them on the wheel of poverty.

Since the research was conducted during the Corona Virus pandemic, when the world was on lockdown, participants, who were engaged in full-time office jobs, also mentioned lack of childcare as a reason for their economic hardships, as some of them even had to leave their jobs due to their inability to manage time. The other participants mentioned that due to the shifting of schools to online education, taking care of their children at home took away from them the opportunities of working even part-time to earn for their family. A couple of participants mentioned receiving childcare support from their immediate family members, whereas the rest had no support whatsoever, making them further vulnerable to poor economic conditions.

### ***Health Vulnerability***

The Corona Virus pandemic is a health hazard that has made people from all demographics vulnerable to physical and mental health issues. Participants, who went through the transition of becoming single mothers during the pandemic, have become many times more vulnerable to physical and mental health-related problems during the pandemic as compared to other women and men. Their newly changed social status, the stigma, *Iddah*<sup>1</sup>, and mobility restrictions during *Iddah* increase their vulnerability to health-related issues. Their economic vulnerability also removes the privilege of affording good healthcare for themselves and their child(ren), increasing their vulnerability. Mental and physical health problems induced by and faced during *Iddah* is another under-researched topic, which we recommend as a reference point for future research.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, this paper has first highlighted that the Corona Virus pandemic has inflicted single motherhood due to an increased surge of widowhood and divorce. Through evidence gathered through the review of literature, this research supports the claim that more men than women have lost their lives amid the pandemic, leaving behind their widows as single mothers to their children. Similarly, data gathered through secondary sources indicate an increase in the percentage of divorce among couples amid the pandemic, again leading to single motherhood.

Second, this research has also highlighted that becoming a single mother during the pandemic has increased women's social, economic, and health-related vulnerability in Pakistan; (i) social vulnerability of single mothers has increased due to a lack of traditional security network and social support, leading to feelings of insecurity and unsafety for single mothers and their children; (ii) economic vulnerability of single mothers has increased due to them usually being the only bread-winners for their children with no financial support. Increased prices of necessities, including house rent and food, and lack of childcare facilities due to lockdown, seemed to push single mothers into the cycle of poverty. Some participants also mentioned losing their jobs due to their inability to manage their children single-handedly; and (iii) health vulnerability due to expensive healthcare, increased mental and physical health problems, and less time to rest and improve their health.

Third, building on primary data and analysis, this research offers a set of recommendations for policy and practice based on the principles of evidence-based policymaking. The recommendations are as follows:

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Based on the analysis, the study offers recommendations against each dimension of vulnerability for both the short- and long-term to reduce the vulnerability of single mothers during and after the pandemic. These recommendations are for the Government of Pakistan, relevant ministries, and national and international Non-Governmental Organizations working to improve women's lives in Pakistan. In particular, we recommend the following:

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<sup>1</sup> In Islam, *iddah* is the period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man. In Pakistani culture, widows and divorced women are not supposed to meet other men or go out of their homes "unnecessarily" to avoid interaction with men.

### ***Building Safety Networks***

The first recommendation is to build safety networks for women who are single mothers since, most of the time, they are vulnerable to issues of safety. Many participants indicated feeling insecure about themselves and their child(ren) and had no safety networks. Safety networks can be in the form of shelter homes for themselves and their children and/or free or low-cost housing available for single mothers and their children.

### ***Providing Income Support***

The second recommendation is to provide income support or public work opportunities to single mothers to increase women's paid work. This recommendation includes flexible working times and the option of working remotely, as most of the participants mentioned not being able to be physically at work, especially during the pandemic, when schools were shifted to distance learning. Many participants mentioned the fear of losing their job because of their unavailability, which, as one of them mentioned, was understood as a lame excuse by her employer.

### ***Supporting Women-Owned Small Businesses***

The third recommendation is to provide financial and social support to women who own small businesses to maintain or re-establish their businesses. Due to gender roles and social expectations from widows, it sometimes becomes difficult for women entrepreneurs to continue their business after becoming a widow; however, single mothers still need a source of income to raise their children. One of the participants mentioned that she started a small business after her husband's death, but she could not retain it due to a lack of social and financial Single Mothers.

### ***Health Cards***

There is enough evidence in the literature, confirmed by the findings of this research, that single mothers tend to ignore their health as they prioritize the needs and wants of their children and other family members over their health. This neglect leads to various health problems which single mothers face in their life, including life-long illnesses such as diabetes, blood pressure, and heart-related diseases. Single mothers often do not have the financial resources to pay for regular check-ups and diagnostic tests, which makes them neglect their health even when they have visible signs of illness. We recommend issuing "single mother health cards" to single mothers, giving them free -fast track- health care.

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Authors have no conflict of interest.

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