**FACTORS AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF LOW-INCOME SINGLE MOTHERS ON WELFARE**

**Introduction**

    Single mothers are women with children who have to play the roles of both the father and the mother. While some mothers may choose to be single, most of them do not always have a choice, perhaps due to some unforeseen circumstances such as the demise of their spouse. Under all these circumstances, the mother has to provide for their children in all their basic needs, such as education, shelter, food healthcare among other things. There are several reasons which lead to single motherhood. However, the two major reasons include unplanned pregnancies, and the death of the spouse/husband (Broken Promises, 2014). Single mothers often face challenges such as financial constraints which make them struggle to meet the basic needs of their families. According to Wright (2012), 80% of the single mothers work under deplorable working conditions with meager pay and without other benefits such as health insurance coverage, retirement benefits, paid sick leaves among other necessary amenities. Wright (2012) also adds that single mother families are almost five times poorer when compared to families of married couples. All these factors contribute significantly to the inability of the single mother families to access appropriate healthcare.

The modern society is embracing single motherhood without considering the associated challenges. In the US, as per the 2017 Census Bureau Statistics, 11,667,000 families were headed by single parents. 81.4% of the families have single mothers. 50 percent of them never married, 29% divorced and 21% were widowed or separated from their husbands. On employment status, two third of the single mothers had employment opportunities away from their homes, 27.5% did not get jobs throughout the year whereas 22.4% had employment benefits (Damaske, Bratter and Frech, 2017). The single mothers had a medium income of $35,400. On poverty, the single mothers had a rate of 35.6% compared to 6.6% for married families. The objective of this discussion, therefore, is to explore and examine factors affecting the health of low-income single mothers on welfare and resources available to them.

**Current Conditions**

    While some single mothers may have a source of income, most of them live in abject poverty and uncertain conditions of employment (Ernie, Mitchell & Herd, 2005). This is an outright indication of the living conditions that the single mothers have to endure and also to overcome to be in a position to provide for their families. Life becomes extremely hard for women who are compelled to take care of their children in their single motherhood status. The women encounter various odds of life such as misconceptions from other members of the society which they have to overcome or even have to live with. Among other challenges, obtaining proper health care for themselves as well as that of their children is a huge challenge for these mothers. Kathryn and Lein (1997) state that these single mothers endure very hard living conditions which are characterized by lack of access to healthcare insurance and those who join the welfare programs do so as a result of pressure from their families or even due to the unreliability of their low-income jobs. The factors can be categorized into economic, social and environmental which affect the health of the low-income single mothers. Some of these factors are beyond their control while others are a result of their actions.

**Economic Stressors**

    Economic conditions are a major factor that affects the health of low-income single mothers. For instance, having inadequate funds to sufficiently cater to all the basic needs of the family could significantly lead to psychological stress to them. It is common knowledge that financial constraints could easily impose mental disturbance to individuals who cannot adequately meet their needs. Therefore, there is no doubt that financial woes cause a lot of mental stress to the single mothers which subsequently affects their mental health resulting into severe mental disorders. Lack of sufficient funds also bars them from subscribing to health insurance programs and other medical covers which can allow them to access to decent and specialized healthcare services in the event that they fall sick. As a result, the single mothers together with their families succumb to or even suffer from the simple ailments which could be easily handled if they had proper medical cover.

**Social Stressors**

    Social factors also affect the health of low-income single mothers. One of the social factors, as stated by Jayakody, Danziger, and Pollack (2000), is drug and substance abuse. Most single mothers, with an intention to get over the stress, often resort to using drugs and other narcotic substances. It is widely known that excessive or uncontrolled use of these narcotic substances significantly affects the health of those who use them, single mothers included. The inability to acquire sufficient and relevant education which can allow them to secure better jobs that can offer attractive salary is another social factor that affects the health of these single mothers. This is because little education they have only allowed them to secure low paying jobs which subjects them to indecent lives and poor health.

    Lack of support from family members and being subjected to unfair treatment such as discrimination and misconceptions regarding their decisions sometimes affect their health. This is because such unfair treatment and also the feeling of neglect by family members subject the mothers to mental torture. This, in turn, affects their health significantly even when they are on welfare programs or even when they have adequate resources allocated to them to cater for the healthcare needs.

**Environmental Stressors**

    In other instances, environmental factors are responsible for affecting the health of the low-income single mothers. According to Siefert, Kristine et al (2000), environmental issues such as neighborhoods that are marred with violence, scarce and inadequate opportunities, among other issues are major contributors to depression among single mothers and especially those who are living on low incomes. The single mothers find it extremely difficult to cope with the environmental stressors which lead to depression, significantly affecting their health. Other single mothers have, at some point, been subjected to physical abuse by their family members and other close relatives resulting in the development of health-related complications such as mental disorder.

**Health Risks**

    Single mothers are at a higher risk of being affected by health-related conditions when compared to their married counterparts. According to Mehta (2016), the chances of developing health-related complications on single mothers increased by 80% in women who lived as single mothers for a period of 14 years. This is an indication of how single motherhood can significantly contribute to detrimental health. Other studies by Jones (1989) have also revealed that the health risks in the single mothers increase as the mothers grow older and as a consequence, most of them are unable to perform economic activities to support themselves as well as their families. Some of the health risks include mental health, health risks due to substance abuse and also physical health risks which are associated with obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

**Mental Health**

    Studies have shown that single mothers are at a higher risk of developing mental health complications as compared to the married women. According to Subramaniam et al. (2014), the risk increases due to the various hardships the single mothers undergo which include financial constraints, discrimination by family members and other members of the society, lack of equal opportunities such as in employment among other factors. Given their numerous chores and responsibilities they are often depressed and sometimes they developmental disorders.

**Substance Abuse**

    Substance abuse in single mothers is another factor which exposes them to health risks. Excessive consumption of substances such as alcohol, cigarettes, bhang among other narcotics put their health at huge risks. Most of them consume these substances with an objective of relieving themselves from the depression and stress which is caused by the hardships they encounter. Most of these substances are known to cause detrimental health effects, for instance, excessive consumption of alcohol can result in liver damage while excessive consumption of bhang can cause brain damage. These are just some of the health risks the single mothers are exposed to as a result of substance abuse.

**Physical Health Associated to Obesity, Hypertension, and Diabetes**

    Most single mothers are unable to obtain proper and balanced diet due to their financial constraints. As a result, they are compelled to eat meals that lack crucial nutrients which are required in the body for proper functioning. The mothers are therefore exposed to the risk of deficiency diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes among others.

**Resources and Programs**

    These are amenities and aids provided to the single mothers by various governmental and non-governmental agencies with an objective of improving their living conditions. These amenities include housing, job opportunities, and medical aids among others.

**Availability of Programs**

Various programs are available to assist the single mothers to overcome the challenges they encounter. According to Jones (1989), the U.S. government has several programs which are meant for the single mothers; these include old age insurance, unemployment insurance, and medical care insurance among other programs.

**Access and qualifications**

    There are qualifications which a person must meet to qualify for the programs. The main qualifications are that a person must be a single mother and probably one who has low income. These conditions and qualifications are necessary for ensuring that the programs benefit the intended group of persons who, in the case, are the single mothers. Failure to have such conditions could possibly lead to misuse of the programs and perhaps fail to meet the intended purpose.

**Effectiveness and Improvement of Programs**

    These programs and resources have proved to be extremely effective in catering to the needs of the single mothers together with their families. The single mothers are able to access better health care through the medical insurance programs; also the single mothers are cushioned against employment uncertainties through unemployment insurances. However, these programs need to be improved in terms of coverage and capacity to ensure that the single mothers’ needs together with their families are adequately covered.

**Conclusion**

In the study, various factors which affect the health of low-income single mothers on welfare have been extensively discussed. Some of these factors include substance abuse, depression caused by the hardships they encounter, and societal factors such as discrimination by family and community members. The health risks that they are exposed to have also been highlighted. These risks include mental health, risks caused by substance abuse and also physical health risks which are caused by their inability to access decent meals.

Single mothers are at a high risk of developing different health complications. First, they could develop mental health disorders such as depression due to several hardships and discrimination they face from the rest of the society. Second, they could begin abusing drugs and alcohol as a strategy for dealing with depression or stress. Finally, they could have obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, which could result from an inability to access quality healthcare and have a balanced diet. These diseases could have a negative impact on their quality of life.

Studies have been conducted regarding the causes of single motherhood, challenges faced by single mothers while trying to provide for their families, as well as programs that can be employed to ensure they live a better life. However, more studies need to be conducted to investigate and determine whether there could be any negative implications or impacts to the children who are brought up by these single mothers. This would be necessary for ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to prevent such negative effects on the children.

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