

From social exclusion to inclusion: Single-mother families and social policy in Taiwan

Abstract

Female-headed single parent families are one of the most concerned issues in the contemporary family or women studies. From the perspectives of the Taiwanese culture, married women are like water spilled on the ground and can never be retrieved. Being single mothers, how they interpret their experiences of social inclusion or exclusion? How our service system can rebuild and strengthen single mothers' social inclusion? These concerns are the main topics which this paper wants to explore.

Five focus groups are held to collect mothers' subjective interpretations. In-depth interview are also conducted. Results indicated that the informal support systems are limited for single-mother families. Instead, self-help groups and social welfare system are playing the influential roles. Some implications, i.e. the reshape of the value system, the support of self-help groups, the revision of social assistance system and a coordinated social service delivery, are proposed and hope to help those women in need.

Keywords: single-mother families, social exclusion, social policy

Background

The concept of "social exclusion" is originally applied, from a financial or material point of view, to poor and low-income individuals and families, whose participation in social activities such as employment, housing, education, and health, are hindered by poverty. In contrast, "social inclusion" means unhindered participation in economic and social activities such as employment, housing, education, and health, among others. From the point of view of public policy, social inclusion is a response to the negative effects of social exclusion, requiring the elimination of factors that hinder the participation of individuals and families in economic and social activities through positive and supporting policies (Davis & Hill, 2006).

The concept of social exclusion has evolved. It is no longer limited to poverty and low income, but also applies to many other social aspects, such as employment, economy, housing, education, and policy, and emphasizes the interaction among these different aspects. According to Wang (2001), social exclusion has five aspects: (1) Employment: unemployment or marginalization in labor market; (2) Poverty: financial weakness in spite

of welfare provided by the government; (3) Participation in organization and decision-making process: absence of the right to vote, not belonging to any political or social group; (4) Interpersonal relationship: limited social network, marginalized or stigmatized, or lack of support from family members, friends, or communities; and (5) Living space: limited living space, or having to live in an inferior area.

Based on a financially disadvantageous position and isolated social relationships, Sheu (2004) presented six aspects of social exclusion, which include: exclusion from the labor market, economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, exclusion from social relations, spatial exclusion, and institutional exclusion. Social exclusion means a person is being discriminated, or negatively evaluated, based on the standards set by mainstream culture, lifestyle, or values. Institutional exclusion refers to the design and implementation of a policy that brings about insecurity, dependence, humidity, or negative feeling among some individuals. How much social inclusion or exclusion do single mothers feel if we apply the above-mentioned aspects of social exclusion in their case? Further study needs to be carried out to have the answer.

Previous studies have numerous discussions on families headed by a single mother. Some discussed the financially weak position of single mothers and the impact of such position on the education of their children, their preschool educational arrangement, and their mental and physical health, as well as their housing, community security, and social relations (e.g., Jackson et al, 2000; Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000 ; Murry et al, 2001 ; Clampet-Lundquist, 2003 ; Christopher, 2004 ; Estrada & Nilsson, 2004 ; Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Kaplan et al, 2005). Some studies focused on parenting and parent-child relationship, and discussed the impact of pressure of parental role and parenting method on the children's mental adaptation (e.g., Painter & Levine, 2000 ; Lipman et al, 2001 ; Murry et al, 2001 ; Deater-Deckard et al, 2002 ; Guttman & Rosenberg, 2003 ; Berger, 2004 ; Demuth & Brown, 2004 ; Ricciuti, 2004 ; Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005). Other studies focused on interpersonal relationships and discussed the interaction between single parents and their children and its impact on the formation of the children's personalities and self-concept (e.g., Reid et al, 1989 ; Kelly & Emery, 2003) .

Mental and physical adaptation methods of single parents, their parenting capability, ability to sustain a parent-child relationship, and their cumulative impact on the mental and physical well-being of their children are another issues (e.g., McGroder, 2000; Mistry et al, 2002; Ram & Hou, 2003; Wood et al, 2004). Some studies reported that single mothers are susceptible to threats and violence, affecting the amount of social support that they should be receiving (Bassuk, et al, 1997; London, 2000; Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Clampet-Lundquist, 2003; Estrada & Nilsson, 2004). Furthermore, some studies focused on the aspect of work and reported that although single mothers may be employed, they easily become financially vulnerable group or working poor (Bergmark & Palme, 2003:118; Mason, 2003:51).

Compared with employed mothers in two-parent families, single mothers feel more pressure in raising their children, in work, and in fulfilling their roles as a parent. In addition, their single status and financial concerns may also limit their employment options and their occupational development. Although some work arrangements, such as a part-time or job-sharing work, can help balance work and family responsibilities, most single mothers are not willing to take this option (Gill & Davidson, 2001: 396-397).

As discussed above, single mothers are at a difficult position with regard to finance, child care, social relationships, psychological well-being, behavior, living space, employment, and other aspects. As a group, single mothers can easily be excluded by society. Therefore, it is necessary to provide some form of social support to single-mother families.

In Taiwan, single-parent families showed an increasing trend in number in recent years. However, they are different in many ways, such as in the cause of formation, gender of single parent, and whether the parent is employed or living with relatives. For example, according to relevant data, about 60% of single-parent families are female-headed household, families, most single-parent families are a result of divorce, single mothers' employment rate is lower than that of single fathers (female 54.3%, male 64.8%), and more single fathers are living with their parents than single mothers (female 21.73%, male 58.33%) (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, 2002,2003; Pong &

Wang, 2003; Hsueh, 2002) . The status of the single mother is in an inferior position and will be easily excluded from the society, compared to that of the single father.

In this study, the researcher takes single mothers as the subject. This is because relevant research indicated that single mothers are vulnerable in finance and other aspects of life (e.g., Pong & Wang, 2003 ; Kuo, 2003 ; Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999 ; Millar & Rowlingson, 2001:2 ; Bergmark & Palme, 2003 ; Brown & Kesselring, 2003 ; Gucciardi et al, 2004). These single mothers not only have lost their husbands, moreover, they also have lost close linkage with their parents and their new network with their husbands after they married. This double loss causes double hurt to single mothers. Does the termination of marriage also mean the end of the social network that they established with their husbands or on their own? How do single mothers establish a new social network? What is the process involved? Although single mothers have been the subject of various research works, we believe it is necessary to pay more attention to them, considering the fact that single mothers are at difficult position in many aspects of social exclusion.

Research Design

In this study, we adopted qualitative methods to study the subjective experiences of single mothers in obtaining social support. A large part of the data was obtained through five focus group meetings; some data were gathered through in-depth interviews. The sampling criteria mainly included the cause of formation of the single-mother family and the financial status. Considering the fact that divorce and death of spouse are the two major causes that lead to the formation of single-mother families, single mothers from both cases were selected. Participants of two focus group meetings came from two mutual-help groups (4 came from a divorcee group and 6 came from a group of single parents whose spouses have died), and have relatively better income. Financial status is an important issue in single-mother families. In the financially vulnerable single mother group, one coming from a low-income group (N=4) and the other coming from a group of single mothers (N=4) who had low income but lived in the government-owned “Home of Single Parents,” were selected as participants in two other focus group meetings. Participants in the fifth focus group meeting were single parents who did not belong to any self-help group and were not receiving support from the government. There were two single fathers

who participated in the focus group. Their comments were used as proof for the experience of single mothers because they were leaders of single parent associations. Most discussions in this report are based on the comments made by single mothers.

The researcher also interviewed two single mothers. One was a working mother whose daughter was considered a “bad girl.” The other one was a Vietnamese by birth who married a Taiwanese. We conducted in-depth interviews with them because they expected the interview to be held in a private setting.

All meetings and interviews were recorded with prior approval given by the participants. The data obtained from such meetings and interviews are referred to in this report, without mentioning the names of participants. Basically, data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously. Most participants in this study were single mothers receiving financial support from the government or belonging to mutual-help groups. This means that a large number of the participants come from single-parent families that are utilizing social resources. It is necessary to mention that due to the limitation of sample accessibility, most participants are either financially strong or financially weak.

Findings

The results of the research indicate that single mothers do receive positive support from different systems, including their friends, new support systems such as mutual-help groups, and governmental welfare system, that are formed due to their status as single mothers. However, these systems are not always positive. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the positive and negative effects of such supporting systems on single mothers.

I. Positive supports

As mentioned above, the concept of social inclusion corresponds to that of social support. The sources of social support include (Caplan, 1974 ; Gladow & Ray, 1986 ; Pong, 2005): (1) Natural support system or informal support system from family members, relatives, friends, and neighbors, among others; (2) Support from structured informal groups such as believer groups and parents’ committees in school; and (3) Formal support

system provided by professionals such as social workers and consultants who belong to the social welfare system and other formal organizations. Three kinds of support are mentioned as follows:

1. Instrumental support

Instrumental support pertains to materials and direct services provided to single mothers. The result of the research indicates that material support to single mothers includes financial aid, child care and education, housework aid, and housing aid.

(1) Financial aid: Many single mothers mentioned financial aid from their or their husbands' parents. As for those who have just a few relatives or have received only limited financial aid from their relatives, they had to depend on a social welfare network or informal organization such as an educational group and groups involved in charitable causes.

(2) Child care and parenting: Compared with working women in two-parent families, single mothers felt more pressure in child care and work (Gill & Davidson, 2001) . In fact, many babysitters who helped single mothers are women who, in most cases, were mothers of the single mothers. For example, a single mother mentioned that "*my child has been taken care of by my mother since he/she was born.*" (E-F-D-2) Aside from the mothers of single mothers, their sisters, grandmothers, aunts, and almost all female relatives can serve as babysitters. This situation indicates that women, as they have always been, are playing the main role of nurturers in families. As for single-parent families without any female relative, fathers-in-law or those of neighboring families can sometimes act as caretakers.

Structured informal groups, or single-parent mutual-help groups, also play an important role in child care and parenting. By becoming members of these groups, single mothers are able to help each other on various issues such as child care. One single mother said, "*We help each other. In fact, there is a rule, something like an agreement, between us. We take care of each others' children in turn when we are busy.*" (E-F-W-1)

Regarding parenting issues, some single mothers mentioned the positive effects of formal support system. For example, some teachers helped single mothers discipline their

children, and young policemen helped a single mother and her daughter, who played truant and did not go home for many days. To this young girl, these policemen played the role of the father she did not have.

(3) Housework assistance: Many single mothers play the multiple roles of both father and mother. As a result, they can easily be overloaded due to the excessive pressure this situation creates. A single mother said, *“I’m like a candle that burns at both ends and at the middle. I have to work, take care of the child, and do housework. It’s like I’m working all year long without a holiday. This makes me feel exhausted.”* (E-F-D-6) Compared with this single mother, those who live with their parents are just too happy. Although some single mothers do not like to live with their parents, the latter provides assistance on housework, thus their support becomes invaluable.

(4) Housing arrangement: Compared with single mothers of the middle class, single mothers with low income depend more on support from their relatives. As for low-income mothers with little support from their relatives, some municipal governments are providing housing arrangements. However, such support is limited to a certain period of time. During this period, municipal governments provide houses to single-mother families who cannot afford the rent of common houses. After that period (one or two years), however, they will be required to move to other communities on their own. For single mothers living in these facilities, they do not only have a place to live, they can also be helped by social workers and enjoy their services. According to a single mother living in a “Home of single parents,” *“The people here are very kind. They seem to be empathy and put themselves in my position. They really helped me on a lot of things.”* (P-F-W-1)

2. Emotional support

Single-parent mutual-helping groups provide valuable emotional support to single mothers, who may find more love and care in such groups than in other formal systems, largely because they are afforded the opportunity to communicate with their fellow single mothers. Some single mothers commented the following:

“Sharing the same bitter experience, we can understand each other.” (E-F-D-2)

“It’s like light in darkness.” (E-F-U-5)

“The group provides a space, where there is no discrimination, no pressure, where

she (single mother) can breathe.” (E-F-W-1)

3. Informational support

Most single parents lack resource or understanding of the information available to them. Some single mothers said they obtained information on self-help groups from their parents and friends. Others belong to self-help groups and are able to obtain more information, through other members, on self-adaptation, child parenting, employment, and housing. Single mothers living in facilities provided by the government obtained information from the staff working in these facilities. As commended by a single mother, *“He (a staff) always gives me information.” (P-F-W-1)* It seems that social workers in single-parent facilities do a good job in providing information and resources to single mothers in need.

4. Societal support

Societal support entails helping individuals establish a social relationship with others through various social activities. In our study, single mothers said they received societal support mainly from self-help groups. According to a single mother:

“I think XX is a great help to me. We hold meetings here where we can talk and communicate freely. I made many friends in XX. We had similar experiences and suffered similar pains. That is why we can understand each other. I think this kind of emotional support is very important to me.” (E-F-D-3)

Many formal support systems provide financial aids such as subsidies and lunch allowance to children of low-income families. Such financial aids helped single mothers a lot. Other support systems, such as teachers and young policeman, helped single mothers with their children’s parenting and improvement of the child-parent relationship. These positive effects are consistent with other findings of research (e.g., Bainbridge, et al, 2003 ; Brown & Lichter, 2004 ; Jackson, 1998 ; Jackson, et al, 1998, Meyer & Rosenbaum, 2000, Simons, et al, 1993) . However, most single mothers commented that the largest positive support came from informal groups. This is consistent with the conclusion obtained by Ceballo and McLoyd (2002), who pointed out that emotional and instrumental support coming from family members and friends can affect single mothers positively, and the effect is similar to that of child-parent interaction. The difference

between the result of this study and the above-mentioned conclusion is that, in this study, mutual-help groups played a greater role in providing societal support to single mothers.

Two groups of single mothers, one group being the divorcee's group and the other being a mutual-help group of single mothers with deceased husbands, were involved in focus discussion. Sharing similar experiences and feelings, these single mothers have found emotional support from other members. In fact, mutual-helping groups provided not only emotional support, but also support on child care, information and communication, and social relationships. Most of the previous research focused on the role of informal groups in improving the relationship among family members (e.g., Gladow & Ray, 1986 ; Hao & Brinton, 1997 ; Deleire & Kalil, 2002) , but the mutual-helping function of such groups was seldom discussed. Although the result we obtained is possibly due to our sampling method, we still suggest that future research include discussions on the role and function of mutual-helping groups and their importance to single-parent families.

II. Obstructions

It seems that single parents may have some emotional or instrumental problems when utilizing a relevant support system. Such problems or obstructions, related to the utilization of both formal and informal supporting systems, are discussed below.

1. Informal supporting system

According to the results of our study, the lack of interaction and communication among family members is a main factor that kept single mothers from seeking help from informal supporting systems. This means that single mothers have limited access to family support. For social workers who emphasize on the responsibilities of mutual help among relatives, this fact may be an issue needs to be further examined.

(1) No "home" to return to

Termination of a marital relationship leads to weakened ties between single mothers and their husbands' families. Single mothers who divorced may contact the ex-husbands,

but just for issues related to their children. This is particularly true for those divorced due to family violence. One of these single mothers said, *“I just want to run away from him. How can I go see him?”* (P-F-D-6) As for women with deceased husbands, they may feel that their ties with their husbands’ family are gradually weakening, and the love and care among them may turn into fight and hatred if there are any issues related to the distribution of heritage.

As for the relationship between single mothers and their parents, we found that many single mothers believed in the traditional idea that “A married daughter is like water spilled on the ground and can never be retrieved.” Hence, they would never entertain the idea of returning their parents because that will be too much trouble for them. According to a single mother, *“No matter how good a life my parents, brothers, or sisters are living, that’s none of my business.”* (P-F-W-3) It seems that most single mothers are willing to be “independent.” As a single mother said, *“I have to depend on myself.”* (P-F-D-1)

(2) Refusal to help: discrimination against single mothers

None of the single mothers investigated complained of being refused help by their ex-husband’s family. It seems that they consider being refused of help by their ex-husband’s family as totally normal because the men (ex-husband), who served as the link between them and the men’s families, are not their husbands anymore. In contrast, many single mothers complained of being refused by their birth families.

To many single mothers, their parents’ family is a place where they want to stay but are shamed in doing so. Many families still believe that “A married daughter is like water spilled on the ground and can never be retrieved.” It is easy to understand the pains experienced by single mothers when they are refused or not accepted by their parents and relatives. A single mother said, *“My sister-in-law told me, ‘you should go see an expert because we have never experienced anything like this.’ ”* (E-F-D-3) Other suffering for single mothers is how their relatives cannot accept their situation as a single mother.

“I have been divorced for several years, but they still cannot accept this fact (divorce).” (E-F-D-6)

“Sometimes, I can feel that my father does not like me. In fact, I think he has been

refusing me.” (E-F-W-1)

“Apparently, he does not like the idea that I have moved back to his house, particularly with my child. Like other fathers, he cannot accept the fact that his daughter has come back to his house.” (E-F-D-2)

After being refused of help, many single mothers choose to be independent, which means they close the door of communication with others. The termination of marital relationship seems to be the end of many kinds of interpersonal relationship for single mothers.

(3) Victims of the “blaming-the-victim” culture

Single mothers are more easily discriminated than single fathers. In the case of divorce, the mother of the husband tends to think that the wife is responsible for the divorce. A single mother said, *“She (The mother of the husband; mother-in-law) thought that the divorce was my fault because I didn’t take good care of her son.” (P-F-D-1)* No matter the reasons, whether the husband had a lover, was violent, into drug abuse, or was drinking excessively, the wife is always the one to be blamed. In addition, in the case of wives with deceased husbands, they will be considered evil and the cause of the death of their husbands.

(4) Reduced quality and quantity of support

In general, the state of being single usually lasts for two years. To many single mothers, their relatives and friends may provide certain help in occasions when the husband had a lover or died; however, they may go away or even disappear with the passage of time. A single mother said, *“Almost all my friends have gone.” (E-F-W-1)* Of course, some of them may be willing to help but have only limited resources. It is with this background that mutual-helping groups work to form a new supporting system for single mothers. Most single mothers are not strong enough to deal with everything by themselves. With less and less support coming from relatives and friends, they have to seek out new supporting systems.

(5) Helpers giving more pressure

Single mothers believe they are at a special position and that other people do not understand their pains and demands. Sometimes, improper response coming from people

who want to help may give single mothers more pressure. A divorced single mother said, *“Their response sometimes may make us unhappy or hurt us.”* (E-F-D-3) At other times, help from others turn out to be some kind of pressure. For example, a single mother may be obliged to follow her relatives’ idea, even if she does not agree with it, when asking for help from them.

To sum up, most problems of single mothers originate from their parents. After becoming single, they do not have much expectation from the ex-husband’s family. Their birth families are regarded to have the responsibility of taking care of them. However, single mothers found that they could not have a happy life living with their parents. As pointed out by Pong (2005), a single mother is like a “visitor” in her ex-husband’s family and a “passenger” in her parents’ family. She faces an awkward situation for she does not belong to either family.

Single mothers believe that other people cannot really understand their pains. Their friends may provide some positive support, but such support weakens with the passing of time. The participants of the study did not mention any problem or obstruction of mutual-help groups. Perhaps this is because once they become members of such groups, they can understand each other and obtain valuable support. This fact also indicates that mutual-help groups are extremely important for single mothers attempting to establish a new social network after the termination of their marital relationships. Further studies on this aspect are necessary.

2. Formal supporting systems

Some studies showed that financially vulnerable single-parent families usually accept aid from formal organizations (Lin & Chin, 1992; Pong & Chang, 1995; Chang, Hsueh & Chow, 1995; Pong & Wang, 2003) , largely because of the resources that these organizations possess. The results of this study also indicate that the interaction between single mothers and the government focused on financial aid. In some cases, this interaction was also related to the single mother’s accessibility to these resources.

(1) Values: A feeling of being discriminated

Discrimination against single mothers is the main factor obstructing the interaction of single mothers with formal supporting systems. As commented by a single mother, *“I think there is a certain degree of discrimination in the welfare agreement signed with the government. It’s just a feeling though. It’s like being single is my fault. It’s like they are saying ‘if you want better life, you should not have divorced.’”* (E-F-D-1)

(2) Laws and regulations

Most people contacting formal supporting systems are those who are financially vulnerable. Formal sectors provide social assistance, help women get employed, or obtain loans.

- a. Single-parent families are not considered as independent families in the current social assistance system.

Stricter criteria for judging low-income family is the most disputed negative factor impeding access to social support. According to a single mother, *“You have to be poor enough if you want to be qualified.”* (E-F-D-3)

In this study, the researcher found that in many cities, the income of all relatives within three generations, including the income of the ex-husband, even the assets and income of the ex-husband’s parents, are all calculated as the income of the single-mother family. And that will affect their qualifications to get their low-income status. It seems that those who designed the social support system ignored the fact that single mothers are isolated from the assets of their parents due to their marriage and from the assets of their husbands’ parents due to the termination of marital relationship. Such a policy makes single mothers even more vulnerable financially. According to some single mothers:

“They wanted me to provide my ex-husband’s income certificate, real estate certificate, and other certificates. I have divorced him and I want to disappear from his life. And now they want me to go back to him for his certificates!” (E-F-D-1)

“If I have to deal with him this way, I’d rather choose not to receive financial aid. He’s looking for me. How can I present myself before him and ask for money?” (P-F-D-6)

b. The criteria for social assistance frequently change.

The frequent changes in the criteria for judging low-income families convey a great impact on single-mother families. Single mothers complained that each year, they would be checked and asked to submit various certificates. In some cities, the assets and income of relatives within three generations, including those of the ex-husbands' parents, are calculated as the income of single-mother families. In other cities, the cause for the formation of single-parent family is considered as a criterion for adjudging low-income families. The frequent changes in the judging criteria have confused single mothers greatly.

c. Complicated procedure involved in the application for pioneering loan

For single mothers, pioneering loan is one of the options for changing their financial status. However, the current procedure for applying for this loan is too complicated. To apply, single mothers will have to submit their business plan, real estate setting, and other documents. The loan will not be granted prior to the actual operation of the business. These limitations, as well as the delay in granting the loan, prevent single mothers from taking this option.

(3) Administrative procedure

Low-income families need to deal with government organizations frequently. Negative factors in this area include extremely long waiting times for approval, which may affect the household and the children's education, and the bureaucracy and complicated procedures that may discourage single mothers from continuing with their application. Some single mothers even believe that public servants kept their documents in drawers and if they did not follow up, their documents will not be processed.

(4) Gatekeepers: Lack of understanding and human-oriented service

Although there are some participants who appreciate the work of social workers, others had unpleasant experiences with them. This is probably because single mothers are somewhat sensitive regarding discrimination against them. This result is a reminder that social workers or gatekeepers need to be sensitive to the feelings of single mothers, particularly those who are applying for low-income aids. Some single mothers complained, "*People working in the public security department are too arrogant. It's like I have to beg them for what I want.*" (E-F-W-1)

(5) Resources

The demands of single-mother families may include finance, child care, mental health, housing, employment, and legal service, among others. All these demands cannot be dealt with by a single government organization, and the government may need to provide cross-department services to single mothers. However, according to the results of this study, one factor discouraging single mothers from accepting formal support is cross-department consulting, especially those carried out by phone, where they need to call one department after another. In some cases, single mothers were only given another phone number but nothing else was done for them. Upon calling up another department, they were just given yet another phone number.

Lack of information or understanding of information is another reason accounting for the single mothers' inability to access welfare, particularly for "new" single mothers who may not be able to take full advantage of opportunities at the right time. A single mother commented, *"I didn't know I needed to apply for that. By the time I learned about it, they told me it was past the deadline."* (E-F-W-1) When the single mothers try to acquire more information, the staff may say, *"How would I know what you want if you didn't apply for it?"* (P-F-D-6)

Other factors, such as cost, time, and child care, also reduced single mothers' access to welfare. As stated by some single mothers, *"They ask me to pay a certain amount for a particular expense, but that amount is pretty high for me"* (E-F-D-1) and *"I quit because I cannot set aside time for it."* (E-F-U-5) Some training courses arranged for single mothers are aimed at helping them find jobs. However, single mothers find it very difficult to attend these courses because there is no child care service available.

Discussions

Does termination of a marital relationship mean the end to an existing supporting system? The result of this study indicates that although single mothers may receive support from relatives and friends, they can feel the gradual weakening and reduction of such support. Support from the ex-husband or his parents are not expected because the

end of the marital relationship has brought about fundamental changes in the position of a single mother in the social network of her ex-husband. Single mothers receive more support from their parents, but this display of support does not always end up as satisfying as initially expected. In fact, in a patriarchal society, daughters are considered members of their husbands' families once they get married. Single mothers found that they could not receive sufficient support from their parents, largely due to the traditional idea that "a married daughter is like water spilled on the ground and can never be retrieved," as well as the "blame-the-victim" culture and extended period of being single. We suggest that professionals working in social welfare should pay attention to the loss of "mutual support among family members" and consider providing more help to single-mother families, families that need genuine support from the social welfare system.

Mutual-help groups are providing valuable emotional, informational, and societal support to single mothers, particularly to those who have lost the support of their relatives and friends. Many single mothers are also receiving support—mostly material—from the social welfare system. Most single mothers have few complaints about mutual-help groups. This is possibly because what they were mainly looking for in these groups was emotional support, thus they did not expect much else in terms of other forms of assistance. Therefore, it is necessary to promote these groups financially, considering the fact that they lack resources and professional capabilities.

Financially vulnerable individuals, particularly single mothers, are facing risky situations. The existing public welfare system, however, with its complicated rules and procedures, is discouraging these people from applying for social welfare support. Meanwhile, as gatekeepers of public resources, the people working in social security departments do not understand the pains and demands of single mothers, which are made even worse by their lack of information. This lack of understanding has caused distrust, with single mothers complaining against public servants and verbalizing their bitter experiences of discrimination because of a generally perceived lack of moral values. Based on the findings, professionals working in public welfare should pay attention to the visible and invisible social exclusions against single mothers. In addition, the existing public welfare system should be improved to increase the availability of social welfare to single mothers and encourage them to seek for more help from society.

Further efforts are necessary to change the public image of single parents. Our study reveals that there is prejudice against single parents in both formal and informal supporting systems. Society's overall acceptance of single parents is extremely important for improving their self-acceptance and communication with the community. Although prior reports indicate that informal supporting systems are the resource most frequently utilized by single-parent families, we have found that these systems can only provide limited support, even imparting negative effects. For example, many single parents were not willing to receive help from their relatives and friends due to the non-acceptance of their status and improper response. As for the staff working in public welfare departments, they are tasked to control resources and identify fraud. In their position, however, they cannot understand the difficult situation of single-parent families. All these need to be improved in the future.

Welfare providers should avoid discriminating against single parents when delivering social welfare services. In addition, they should ask the public to respect the different types of families and free choice on marriage, and help single mothers and their families re-establish their social network. As for the relatives of single mothers, they also need help from formal and informal supporting systems and be educated to properly respond and meet the demands of single mothers. The formal supporting system needs to play a more active role in supporting single-mother families by educating the public to accept single-mother families and exerting efforts to change these families' negative public image.

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