

Socio-Economic Status of Single Mothers and their Children's Access to Formal Education in Awka South Local Government Area

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical tool for the development of individuals and societies. However, the child or children of single mothers have difficulties accessing formal education based on the socio-economic status of the mothers. As a result, this examined socioeconomic status of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area. Five research questions guided the study. Four theories were reviewed and anchored on functionalism and social influence theory for the theoretical framework. Qualitative research design was adopted. The target population are single mothers that have given birth to one or more children. The sample size is 30 participants. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. In-Depth Interview (IDI) guided the study and was used to collect qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gotten from the participants. The study found out that single mothers face complex challenges in securing their children's education, influenced by their educational level, income, employment, and time constraints. Strengthening government support and implementing inclusive policies reduces these barriers, ensure equal educational access and improving long-term outcomes for children raised in single-parent households. It was recommended that government should implement educational programmes aimed at enhancing the literacy and skill levels of single mothers, empowering them to make informed decisions about their children's education and better manage their resources. The government should introduce government and non-governmental programmes that provide financial assistance to single mothers.

Keywords: Children, Education, Motherhood, Single Mother, Socioeconomic Status.

Introduction

Education is one platform that has supported the socioeconomic development of society. This has greatly helped in cultural transmission, passing along values, knowledge, and skills deemed important to society. This has prompted citizens to take responsibility for societal development (Edgerton, Roberts, & von Below, 2012). However, the family play important role in ensuring that access to formal education gets to every member of the family (Bardley & Cowyn, 2014). This is due to the fact that the family is the first, smallest, and most important unit of a child's social organisation. It is in charge of the physical, mental, and moral development of the child (Abdu-Raheem, 2015). Mao (2022) agreed that the socioeconomic status of the family plays an important role in the child's learning process.

Socio-economic status (SES) refers to an individual's or group's social and economic position relative to others in society. It is typically measured through a combination of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige, and sometimes includes additional factors such as wealth, neighborhood, or access to resources (Krieger et al., 2021). SES is a critical determinant of life opportunities and outcomes, influencing health, education, and overall well-being. Scholars view SES not just as a static measure but as a multi-dimensional construct reflecting both material resources and social standing, which together shape an individual's access to power, privileges, and societal participation. In view of this, many mothers have been on the forefront to ensure the family members gets quality education. More so, single mothers are not also left out in making sure that their children acquire quality education

In the United States in 2018, single mothers headed 28% of all households, more than doubling the rate of 1960. The vast majority of single-parent households are headed by mothers, but the number of father-headed families is increasing and now accounts for approximately 17% of all households, but the single mothers are more in number (Crabtree & Kluch, 2020). In addition, Japan has approximately 1.23 million single mother households

in Asia (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, according to the Gallup World Poll, which was conducted in more than 140 countries and regions, representing more than 99% of the global population between 2014 and 2018, there are 31% of single mothers in the world. Sub-Saharan Africa has 32% of the population of single mothers, while Nigeria has 9.2% of the African population (Gallup, 2020; Crabtree & Kluch, 2020). According to these reports, single motherhood in Nigeria is higher than in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, but lower than in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia (Gallup, 2020).

Many factors can lead to single motherhood such as divorce, separation, break-up, abandonment, domestic violence, rape, death of the other parent, childbirth by a single person, or single-person adoption (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Being a parent without a partner can also be the result of a life decision (single parent by choice). Many of them are more vulnerable to economic difficulties, as well as stress and depression, with financial factors contributing to this vulnerability (Pujar, Chanda, & Hittalamani, 2018).

From a functionalist perspective, single motherhood reflects a shift in societal structures and norms that once prioritized nuclear family systems as essential for societal stability. The increasing prevalence of single-parent households challenges traditional functions of the family—economic support, socialization, and emotional care—potentially leading to social strain and requiring institutional adaptations. Simultaneously, Social Influence Theory explains how cultural narratives, media portrayals, peer opinions, and policy trends shape individual decisions toward single parenthood, either by normalizing or stigmatizing it. These influences can affect both public perceptions and self-conceptions, thereby contributing to the psychological and economic vulnerabilities many single mothers experience.

Similarly, UN Women (2020) reported that many of these single mothers are unable to earn money or access wealth/assets and must live in extended households with other relatives, where they are at the mercy of the 'purse-holder.' There are 101.3 million lone mothers living alone with their children worldwide, and at least another 101.3 million women whose reality and potential vulnerability, income, and/or care needs are invisible to

policymakers because they are not counted by official statistics (UN Women, 2020). Berryhill and Durtschi (2017), on the other hand, hypothesized that children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to aspire to higher education through formal education.

However, many countries in the world are not immune from these socioeconomic challenges many single mothers face in order to make their children access formal education. Access to education refers to the opportunity for individuals or groups to participate in formal or informal learning without discrimination, barriers, or undue limitations. Scholars define it as not only the physical availability of schools and educational resources but also the social, economic, and cultural conditions that enable learners to enroll, attend, and complete educational programs successfully (UNESCO, 2020). Access encompasses affordability, proximity, inclusivity, and equality, ensuring that marginalized or disadvantaged groups—such as girls, children from low-income families, or persons with disabilities—can exercise their right to education (World Bank, 2018).

These situations as seen above might not be different in Nigeria where statistics have shown that there are many single mothers. For instance, Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State is a place where men are given priority (patriarchy) in almost everything. Many families rejoice when a male child is born compared to female child; and men are highly considered in family inheritance (Agbara, 2024). However, how is it possible for the children of single mothers in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State to access formal education considering the poor socioeconomic status of these single mothers? It is against this background that this study was initiated to provide information to inform policy decisions to support single mothers. To fill this gap, this study examined the socio-economic status of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area.

Statement of the Problem

Single mothers, who bear the dual responsibility of parenting and providing for their households, frequently encounter barriers that hinder their children's access to formal

education. The socioeconomic challenges they face—including low income, unemployment, lack of support, and societal stigmatization—often compromise their ability to prioritize and afford quality education for their children (Orji, 2024). Studies show that single mothers are disproportionately represented among low-income earners and are more likely to experience financial instability compared to their married counterparts (Umeji, 2024). This lack of financial resources can prevent them from affording school fees, learning materials, and other educational necessities.

Balancing work and care giving responsibilities further complicates matters, sometimes resulting in irregular school attendance or neglect of children's educational needs (Ugwukah & Ume-Ezeoke, 2024). Social stigma attached to single motherhood in Nigerian society also affects both mothers and children, limiting access to support networks and exposing children to bullying or discrimination in school (Umeji, 2024). These economic, social, and systemic challenges create a cycle of disadvantage, contributing to inter-generational poverty. Children who drop out due to financial or social barriers are less likely to secure gainful employment later, perpetuating the cycle. Empirical evidence supports this, as Lasisi (2024) found that financial difficulties among single mothers in Nigeria often result in poor academic performance and higher dropout rates among their children.

Existing literature on the socioeconomic status of single mothers and their children's educational access is relatively sparse, particularly within the context of Awka South. Most studies on educational inequality in Nigeria focus broadly on gender disparities or rural-urban divides, often neglecting the unique struggles of single-mother households. While some research has examined the economic hardships faced by single mothers, there is limited exploration of how these challenges directly impact their children's formal education in specific localities such as Awka South. Additionally, few studies have addressed the interplay between social stigma, lack of support systems, and educational outcomes in this demographic group.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study examined socioeconomic status of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between educational level of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State
2. Assess the relationship between income level of education of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State
3. Ascertain the relationship between employment status of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Theoretical Orientation

Functionalism

Durkheim (1912), a key proponent of Functionalism, posited that society functions as an integrated whole, where institutions like education serve essential roles in maintaining stability and social order. Within this framework, socioeconomic status such as particularly access to education, income level, and employment status play a vital role in shaping educational opportunities. Education, as a key institution, is expected to promote meritocracy and equal opportunity. However, the socioeconomic status of single mothers—marked by low income, unstable employment, and limited educational access—often restricts their children's entry into formal education. This structural inequality undermines the functionalist ideal of equal opportunity, revealing that social systems may reinforce, rather than reduce, class-based educational disparities across generations.

Social Influence Theory

Kelman (1958), in his Social Influence Theory, posited that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are shaped through compliance, identification, and internalization in response to social forces. This theory is relevant to understanding how socioeconomic status specifically access to education, income level, and employment status influences single mothers' capacities to conform to societal expectations regarding child education. Limited resources may hinder their ability to support formal schooling, while societal pressures may intensify psychological stress, resulting in reduced educational access and aspirations for their children, thus perpetuating systemic inequality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design. The target population of this research work were single mothers between the ages of 18 and 65years old. According to the report of the last census of the National Population Commission in 2006 as seen in the websites of the National Population Commission of Nigeria and National Bureau of Statistics, Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State has a total population of 270, 300. In this population, there are 25,9188 females in the study area. The sample for this study comprised twenty (30) participants. This sample size is to allow for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of single mothers regarding their socioeconomic status and its influence on their children's access to formal education. Purposive sampling technique was used to determine the participants of the study. The study employed an In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide as the primary instrument for qualitative data collection. The interviews were conducted in English during each In-Depth Interview (IDI) session. Ethical considerations for this study included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality of personal information, and guaranteeing that participation was voluntary. Participants were assured that they could withdraw at any stage without any consequences, and that data collected would be used solely for academic research purposes, in compliance with ethical research standards. Following the data collection process, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of respondents' voices. These transcripts were meticulously read and re-read to ensure an in-depth understanding of the content. The data were then systematically coded, a process that involved assigning descriptive labels to significant portions of the text to facilitate

meaningful categorization. The purpose of this analytical phase was to explore and interpret the underlying meanings within the data, enabling the researcher to draw comparisons, establish relationships, and uncover recurring patterns. The analytical strategy employed was thematic analysis, a widely recognized method for examining qualitative data. The process of thematic analysis began with familiarization, involving careful reading of interview transcripts to understand participants' experiences. Initial codes capturing significant patterns, such as financial constraints and social stigma, were generated. Related codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. Each theme was clearly defined and named, and findings were presented with supporting participant narratives, linking them to the research objectives and literature to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

Summary of the Thematic Analysis

S/N	Step	Description (Contextualized to the Study)
1	Familiarization with Data	Transcribing and repeatedly reading responses from single mothers in Awka South to gain a deep understanding of their socioeconomic challenges and children's educational access.
2	Generating Initial Codes	Identifying meaningful codes such as "financial constraints," "social stigma," or "employment challenges" to capture significant patterns in participants' accounts.
3	Searching for Themes	Grouping related codes into broader themes, for example, "economic barriers," "social barriers," and "systemic challenges."
4	Reviewing Themes	Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent participants' perspectives and align with the overall data-set.
5	Defining and	Clearly describing each theme and linking it to the research

S/N	Step	Description (Contextualized to the Study)
	Naming Themes	objectives, ensuring distinct and coherent representation.
6	Producing the Report	Presenting themes with participants' quotes and connecting them to existing literature to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

RESULTS

Analysis of the Research Questions

The responses from the interviews with the respondents were presented below, reflecting their personal experiences, perspectives, and practices in relation to their children's schooling and interactions with teachers.

Relationship between Educational Level of Single Mothers and Their Children's Access to Formal Education

The first objective was to examine the relationship between educational level of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The themes from this objective were educational attainment of single mothers, mother's education and children's education access, difference between educated and uneducated single mothers and influence of education on choice of schools for children. The responses from the interviews based on the research question one and the themes were presented below:

Educational Attainment of Single Mothers

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the significant influence of parents' educational attainment on the academic performance of their children as shown in the responses from the participants:

One of the participants stated:

- *"You need to be educated to instill education in your child; uneducated parents often strive hard to ensure children attend school despite their own lack of schooling." (Lawyer, 28yrs, Resident at Ifite- Awka)*

In a similar view, a participant, shared her perspective on the importance of education for parents in shaping the educational path for their children. The participant stated that an educated mother with a WAEC certificate expressed a strong desire to further her education at the university. She believes this will help her gain the knowledge needed to properly guide her child through all levels of schooling.

"Well, I will say that as an educated mother and has written my WAEC and have my WAEC certificate I wish to further my education to the university so I could acquire my knowledge to train my child." (Sales Girl, 18, Resident of Okpuno)

In attestation to educational attainment, a participant stated that children of educated single mothers tend to perform better academically. These women's children excel in school and hopes they achieve more educationally than she did.

"Children of educated single mothers tend to perform better academically. I always make sure my kids do well in school and hope they become more educated and successful than I am."
(Business Woman, 25, Resident of Okpuno)

Mother's Education and Children's Education Access

This showed how mother's educational attainment can help their children have access to education. The responses of these mothers are presented below.

Another participant posited that education is a key priority in the home, and it has greatly helped the individual, especially in becoming fluent. The values and importance of education, taught by their parents, are now being passed on to their own children.

"Education is a key priority in my home and in my life so education has helped me so much because it's also helps me to be fluent... these are the things my parents taught me. These are the things I'm also teaching my children."

(Lawyer, 28yrs, Resident at Ifite- Awka)

In agreement with the first assertion, another participant stated that single mothers who are uneducated may not prioritize their children's education, while educated single mothers value education and want their children to benefit from it. Education is seen as key, and those who have it tend to emphasize its importance for their children.

".....an uneducated single mother may neglect her children's schooling, while an educated, dedicated single mother values education and ensures her children benefit from it." **(Business Woman, 27yrs, Resident of Ifite-Awka)**

Another participant also attested that an educated single mother has a significant impact on her child's formal education. Being knowledgeable about the importance of education, she understands its power to change lives and instills this value in her child.

"... being educated actually influences your child formal education yeah. You will have a great impact in them..."
(Civil Servant, 51yrs, Resident of Okpuno)

Difference between Educated and Uneducated Single Mothers

This theme discussed on the differences between single mothers that have attained certain educational level and uneducated mothers for their children to have access to education.

A participant stated that there is a significant difference between educated and uneducated mothers. Educated mothers are dedicated to supporting their children's education, while uneducated mothers may not prioritize or fully understand the importance of sponsoring their children's schooling. In the exact words:

"Yes there is a big difference because you cannot compare uhmm educated mother and uneducated mother. Yes because dedicated mother will be thinking to sponsor her children in school then the uneducated" (Business Woman, 24yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

Another participant confirmed that the education of a single mother influences her dedication to her children's schooling. Uneducated mothers may not prioritize education, while educated mothers value and invest in their children's education.

"... of course, it does because single mother who is uneducated and has zero values for education would not care if their children are in school or not, but a single mother who had access to education and is well dedicated would value education" (Business Woman, 27yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

Another participant maintained that an uneducated single mother may not prioritize her children's education, while an educated and dedicated single mother places high value on education. Education influences her commitment to ensuring her children attend school.

"For the educated single mothers, she was strong to make sure that her children went to a better good school while, uhmm uneducated, single mothers we just ask for any available school around and put their child." (Business Woman, 25yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

Influence of Education on Choice of Schools for Children

This theme was used to know the influence education attain on the choice of school of their children

According to a participant, being educated allows a person to assess the quality of a school by accessing its curriculum and other important information. This knowledge helps in making informed decisions about the best educational options for their children.

"Being educated you'll be able to know the school that is doing well because once you go into the school, you'll be able to have access to what their curriculum or whatever of the setup of the school everything about the school you'll be able to get access to it..." **(Civil Servant, 51yrs, Resident of Okpuno)**

Another participant attested that mothers with better formal education often prioritize their children's academic performance. As a teacher, one mother enrolls her child in tutorials to ensure they gain the best formal knowledge.

"OK, ehh mothers with better formal education the children tend to have this like as a teacher that I am like I want my child to have the best academic performance so I enroll my child in uhmm tutorials so that he will gain this formal knowledge."

(Teacher, 23yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

In agreement with the responses, another participant stated that there is a clear difference between illiterate and literate parents in how they value education. A literate parent is more likely to ensure their children attend school for their personal growth and the betterment of society.

"... you cannot just compare illiterate and a literate person. A literate person will make sure that her children...attend school...even if you don't reach investor level...you'll be able to know left and right..." **(Sales Associate, 25yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)**

The responses of the single mothers showed that mother's educational level influence the choice of school their children.

Relationship between Income Level of Single Mothers and their Children's Access to Formal Education

The second objective of the study was to interrogate the relationship between income level of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The theme gotten from this objective were income level and educational access and utilization of financial assistance programmes. The responses from the respondents on the research question two on the income level of single mothers and their children's access to education are presented below.

Income Level and Educational Access

This theme discussed the influence of the income of the mothers on their children accessing education. In the responses:

According to a participant, financial challenges greatly affect a single mother's ability to support her child's education. Despite the high cost of school fees and limited income, she tries her best, though it remains very difficult.

"Money is king without money you can't do a lot of things... My child school fees is like 70 something thousand naira... If I keep depending on the salary, we would literally not do anything... I try my best. It's really tough." (Lawyer, 28yrs, Resident at Ifite- Awka)

Another participant affirmed that a single mother's income gives her the confidence to pursue her goals. When she is educated and earning, she is more likely to invest in her children's education.

"...Income empowers you to act and invest in your children; an educated single mother uses her earnings to support and enhance her children's education and future opportunities..." (Civil Servant, 51yrs, Resident of Okpuno)

In emphasizing the importance of income to accessing education, a participant stated that a single mother earning monthly finds it difficult to afford quality education and basic school

supplies for her child. This low income makes it challenging to meet her child's educational needs.

"Yeah, as a single mother and also a full-time worker who owns in 25,000 naira every month, I can't afford the luxury of sending my child to a good school with quality teachers." (Sales Girl, 18yrs, Resident of Okpuno)

Utilization of Financial Assistance Programme

This theme was used to get information from the single mothers on whether they have financial assistance programme that helped them to make their children have access to education.

According to a participant, single mothers often struggle financially and sometimes resort to seeking help or starting businesses to support their children's education. Providing scholarships from the early stages of schooling could help reduce their burden significantly.

"I believe supporting single parents should start with scholarships, easing their burdens, as few are willing to provide such foundational help for single mothers and fathers." (Lawyer, 28yrs, Resident at Ifite- Awka)

Another participant added that some single mothers take loans to cover their children's educational expenses. This shows their strong commitment to ensuring their children remain in school despite financial difficulties.

"OK, yes there was a time I took loan to tidy everything that concern my children's school. So yes, I have."
(Business Woman, 27yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

Furthermore, a participant posited that child support programs are rare and often viewed with suspicion due to scams. As a result, some single mothers rely on extended family members for financial support in their children's education.

"I have not like any child support programs. They are very rare to find these days like most of them turns out to

be scams self. But I do beg my big aunties and uncles to support. Which they give me most times." (Sales Girl, 18yrs, Resident of Okpuno)

Relationship between Employment Status of Single Mothers and their Children's Access to Formal Education

The third objective was to ascertain the relationship between employment status of single mothers and their children's access to formal education in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The theme gotten from this objective include employment status and financial stability. The responses from the respondents on research question three and the related themes of employment status of single mothers and their children's access to education are presented below.

Employment Status and Financial Stability

This theme was used gotten from the Participants to whether employment help them become stable in giving their children access to education.

According to a participant, a businesswoman with a successful and profitable business. She generates enough income to spend on her children's needs as she wishes.

I am a businesswoman with a successful income, allowing me to independently provide for and spend on my children as I see fit (Business Woman, 27yrs, Resident of Ifite- Awka)

Another participant posited that being fully employed impacts the single mothers' ability to assist her children with their assignments due to her long working hours. However, her employment allows her to pay for their school fees and educational expenses.

"Ohh yeah, it does affect my children's formal education my being fully employed affects it uhmm... it affects the relationship formal education because being a fully employed mom I am always working. You know ...now is that I am not always available. You know to help them in their

assignments." **(Government Worker, 35yrs, Resident of Okpuno)**

One of the participants added that fully employed single mothers are able to provide for their children's needs, which helps them focus on their studies and perform better academically. In contrast, less educated single mothers may not have sufficient income to support their children's education.

Fully employed single mothers often have children who perform better academically as needs are met, whereas less educated single mothers typically earn less, limiting support for their children's education." **(Business Woman, 25yrs, Resident of Okpuno)**

Discussions of Findings

The findings underscore that maternal education significantly influences both academic support and school choice for children of single mothers. Educated mothers are better equipped with cognitive and emotional skills needed to assist with schoolwork, interact effectively with teachers, and provide a stimulating learning environment (Onyinyechukwu, Henrietta, Rita, Uzor & Okoye, 2024). Moreover, maternal education boosts confidence and decision-making abilities, while uneducated mothers may struggle to interpret school policies (Nsana, 2024). Additionally, educated mothers are more likely to choose schools based on quality and academic offerings, unlike uneducated mothers who prioritize affordability or proximity (Manishimwe, Raimi & Babatunde, 2025). The findings reveal that employment offers single mothers financial stability, enabling them to meet their children's educational needs such as school fees, textbooks, and other learning materials. This financial capacity enhances children's access to and completion of education. Onianwa (2024) affirmed that a steady income allows mothers to support essential school-related expenses. Onochie and Nworie (2025) noted that consistent income promotes better financial planning and reduces reliance on debt. Thus, employment empowers single mothers to support their children's education and promote socioeconomic advancement.

The findings align with Functionalist theory, which posits that education serves as a key institution for social stability and the transmission of knowledge and values (Durkheim, 1997). From this perspective, educated single mothers contribute to the socialization and academic development of their children by providing structured guidance, reinforcing norms, and promoting learning. Similarly, Social Influence Theory explains that children model behaviors, attitudes, and values observed in significant others, including parents (Kelman, 2006). Educated mothers, through their actions and emphasis on education, exert both informational and normative influence, shaping children's motivation, study habits, and school choices. Thus, maternal education functions both socially and cognitively to enhance children's academic outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the responses of single mothers highlight key factors influencing their capacity to support their children's education. Maternal education significantly affects their ability to value schooling and make informed decisions. Educated mothers navigate academic systems more effectively, while those with limited education face barriers. Income and employment provide financial stability, enabling access to educational resources. However, time management remains a challenge. Social support and government interventions, such as scholarships and childcare, are essential. These findings call for inclusive policies addressing both educational and financial constraints. This study advances knowledge by highlighting the interplay between maternal education, socioeconomic status, and children's schooling, offering evidence-based insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to reduce educational inequalities.

Recommendations

Based on the responses from the single mothers, the following recommendations were made to improve their children's access to education:

1. Government should implement a free or subsidized educational programme aimed at enhancing the literacy and skill levels of single mothers, as these empower them

to make informed decisions about their children's education and better manage their resources in Awka South L.G.A.

2. Non-governmental organizations should try as much as possible provide financial assistance to single mothers, especially those with limited income, to help them meet the costs of education, including school fees and learning materials in Awka South L.G.A.
3. The responses of the single mothers revealed that Single mothers should seek vocational skills and entrepreneurial training to improve their income-generating capacity in Awka South L.G.A.

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