

# WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SINGLE PARENTS: REMOVING BARRIERS TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND EDUCATION IN KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

Single parenting has a heavy influence on people's career development. Contrary to two-partner families where parents usually support each other for childcare and financial needs, single parents face a greater need in order to combine their work with their childcare responsibilities. Since the vast majority of single parents are mothers, they have also to deal with the additional difficulties that women face in the labour market. The present chapter aims at presenting the major career issues that arise regarding the career development of single parents in western countries. The most common barriers that obstruct or limit their career growth are presented, along with parent-style typologies that have been proposed in the relevant literature in order to describe their career behaviour. Although the proposed typologies and categorizations are very helpful in understanding single parents' career development, it is stressed that the factors that influence each individual's career development are much more complex and intercorrelated and each case should be viewed individually. Major factors that contribute to this perplexity are examined. In order to better understand the obstacles single parents face, their main career-related characteristics are also examined. Finally, good practices that have been implemented in various countries to reduce the impact of these barriers are discussed.

**Keywords:** Single parenting, Career development, Workplace accommodations, Education barriers, Work-life balance

## INTRODUCTION

The Kenyan family structure has transformed in response to the changing social and economic

realities of the nation. The traditional concept of the nuclear family has become obsolete. Currently, the traditional family structure consisting of a father as the primary earner and a woman as the primary carer for two children is a minority among other family configurations. The prevailing trend is the dual-income household, where both the husband and wife, as well as the mother and father, are employed outside of their home. Simultaneously, there has been a significant surge in the proportion of households headed by a single parent. The single parent, often the woman, assumes the role of both primary breadwinner and carer. In the present social and economic context, single-parent families are disproportionately affected by severe economic difficulties and thus have significant requirements for professional advancement.

While one-parent homes make up a considerable share of family structures, previous research has mostly concentrated on examining the impact of fathers' absence on children, particularly male children (Ickes et al., 2022). Recently, some researchers have made significant progress in investigating additional aspects connected with single parents, broadening the understanding in several domains often studied in family and person research. Researchers studying single-parent households are now identifying several elements that contribute to the vulnerability of these families. They are also isolating certain components of career development that may be used to successfully support single parents.

The research unequivocally demonstrates that the demands of single parents are substantial, and their population is both sizable and growing at a faster rate than any other family structure in contemporary society. While single parents share the characteristic of deviating from the conventional two-parent family, certain categories of single-parent families face significant challenges unique to their respective groups (Malika, 2020). Displaced homemakers are a specific kind of single parents who have unique requirements for work preparation. Adolescent mothers, as a distinct subset of single parents, have a limitation in their life options starting from the motherent they become aware of their pregnancy. Single dads, as a distinct subgroup of single parents, require assistance from educational initiatives that focus on effectively balancing their career and family responsibilities.

According to the idea of relational inequality, the way people make claims for career development based on their gender is likely to differ depending on the specific working environment. Workplaces conform to distinct inequality systems due to variations in their pasts, institutions, and surroundings, as well as the diverse characteristics of their employees. According to this perspective, workplaces exhibit varying responses to governmental efforts aimed at enhancing work-life balance and gender equality (Muasya, 2020). Prior studies suggest that the prevailing standard for an exemplary employee, known as the ideal worker norm, has minimal family responsibilities and places work as the top priority. However, certain workplaces have recognised the benefits of balance and have made efforts to offer supportive work arrangements and foster work-life harmony. Furthermore, the rise of international rivalry, uncertainty, and the need to constantly enhance efficiency have led to increased demands and expectations on employees in some work environments. This has undermined political efforts to achieve a balance between work and family life.

The research examines many areas in which organisations vary and how they impact the assessment of workers' claims' authenticity, including workplace culture, structure, and policies. The research intends to examine if gendered claims-making, where women are less inclined to assert their rights for professional progression, is primarily influenced by workplace cultures that either promote work-life balance or have high demands (Bochere et al., 2021). The research anticipates that these circumstances are also likely to influence whether or not women see themselves capable of fulfilling both their familial responsibilities and the requirements associated with career advancement, hence influencing the formation of gender-specific assertions arising from a gender-based distribution of work. Building upon the relational inequality theory as well as the concept of status value beliefs, this study aims to explore whether gendered claims-making is influenced by a gendered power structure, as well as by formalised personnel practices that shape an employee's perception of their entitlement to make claims.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Single Parents in the Kenyan Work Environment

Kenya's policy directives place achieving gender equality in relation to women's labour market participation at the forefront of their agenda. According to (Oteri & Makhamara, n.d), Kenya has responded to equal opportunities for men and women in the labour market by making substantial changes to its work and family laws in the previous several decades. Furthermore, the criteria for receiving paid parental leave has been revised to only require one year of eligibility. This change aims to promote the commercialization of women's employment and incentivize them to re-enter the workforce earlier following childbirth.

Despite the increasing gender equality in careers, a traditional division of labour tends to emerge within couples after the birth of their first child, aligning with the conventional male-breadwinner model. Ngesu & Kyule (2019) study on the gendered allocation of work validate that women continue to primarily assume the responsibility for caregiving and domestic chores. Consequently, women are exposed to varying indications from the government regarding the achievement of a professional occupation. Gender-normative views and regulations perpetuate the division of labour between men and women based on gender, even when recent political reforms have made a compelling case for supporting women's professional advancement. Motherhood continues to be the primary reason why women choose to work fewer hours and take career breaks.

Single parents depend on childcare services, which may be expensive, resulting in a decrease in income and a higher likelihood of experiencing poverty. The government implemented various measures to assist low-income families (Bago, 2022). Additionally, the government expanded the availability of limited childcare services and provided financial assistance. Jobcentres also offered specialised employment support tailored to the requirements of single parents, as well as voluntary employment programmes were made available as well. Subsequently, there was a rise

in welfare penalties and conditionality pertaining to benefits, housing. This effort has shown more efficacy in transitioning single parents from out-of-work benefits to employment. However, it exhibited lower effectiveness among younger parents due to their limited experience and lack of readiness for the workforce.

The purpose of welfare is to exert influence on the work behaviour of single parents. Nevertheless, their economic condition is adversely affected by policies that were not tailored to address their particular need. According to Munene (2023), the involvement in remunerated employment was defined as a fundamental parental obligation, putting an end to maternal dominance. The economic benefit of parental care was no longer recognised. Consequently, the recognition of single parents as a disadvantaged demographic in need of economic safeguarding was diminished. Individuals actively searching for employment opportunities Imposing financial penalties and employment programmes on single parents creates challenges for individuals with little or no educational background and professional experience to adhere to the limitations of the social assistance system.

Contrary to the burgeoning 'fair' and 'decent' work agendas, changes in regulations compelled single parents to participate in paid employment, leading to a gradual shift in their classification from vulnerable to non-vulnerable as highlighted by Otike et al. (2023). The pressure to be self-reliant and not reliant on unemployment benefits compelled single parents to choose low-quality jobs, however many were unable to overcome poverty even receiving tax incentives or child support payments. Individuals who have been economically inactive for an extended period have difficulties in entering the job market. Moreover, the work opportunities they secure tend to be characterised by poor wages, transitory nature, part-time hours, lengthy or irregular shifts, low skill requirements, and a high rate of employee turnover. A plethora of career opportunities provide little compensation, resulting in insufficient accumulation of funds for savings or retirement.

Individuals with lower qualifications are more likely to experience single parenthood, with women being the majority in this group. Consequently, they encounter greater obstacles when it comes to finding employment due to limited prospects for career advancement, expectations to work part-time, and job instability. Single mothers who had involuntary periods of unemployment or underemployment were more likely to face material challenges compared to single mothers who had stable and sufficient employment. In their 2019 study, Kangogo & Wanambiro examined the correlation between gender and education, finding that single mothers with a degree earned less than men in similar circumstances. They propose that this discrepancy in income is partially attributable to gender-based discrimination within the labour market.

Several pathways might result in a person becoming a single parent, but a significant number of them do so as a consequence of experiencing domestic violence. The work market and paid employment provide special problems for women who have been victims of domestic violence. According to Orwa & Nyangau (2020), the potential consequences include the loss of credentials, job attire or tools, access to references, stable housing, ongoing abuse, expensive legal

proceedings, social isolation, and the absence of childcare. These obstacles might hinder one's ability to get employment and engage in comprehensive career planning, including defining goals, exploring education possibilities, and searching for job opportunities. There is a scarcity of studies specifically examining career advice and development treatments for those who have been victims of domestic violence. The current study has a high degree of specificity and has not yet included the influence of the pandemic on those who have experienced domestic violence.

Barsulai et al. (2020) found that single parents' psychological wellness is negatively impacted by financial challenges, leading to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, paranoia, sadness, and suicide ideation. The health of single mothers, especially those working part-time in low-wage positions, was adversely affected by underemployment. The age of single parents may influence their ability to obtain employment. Older parents, who have accumulated work experience, may be more likely to acquire high-quality jobs compared to younger parents who have never worked.

Employment may be hampered by regional differences since some areas have lower labour market demand. In their study, Daniel (2019), discovered empirical evidence indicating that single mothers exhibit less flexibility in terms of working hours and commuting distance to their workplace. This limitation therefore hampers their capacity to pursue specific employment opportunities. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of versatile part-time employment opportunities that would be advantageous for single parents.

Single mothers, who constitute the majority of single parents, had a more pronounced effect on their income as a result of COVID-19 measures, given that the pandemic had a significant impact on employment in sectors mostly employing women. As to the Guyo (2022), the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on women, leading to higher chances of them being placed on furlough, experiencing job loss, or reducing their working hours to care for their children during the lockdown. Consequently, women got lower income, increasing gender disparity. Barsulai (2022) discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic, single dads with advanced skills opted to switch professions or engage in discussions with their existing employers to get more flexible work arrangements, mostly in response to their caring obligations. In contrast, single fathers in low-skilled occupations had little influence over their schedules.

In his study, Ochoi (2020) examined the effects of COVID-19 on single mothers residing alone with their children versus those living in households with multiple adults. The researchers discovered that single mothers faced more significant stress in terms of handling conflicting responsibilities and struggling to maintain a balance. The lockdown had varying effects on the work capacity of single parents. Some transitioned to remote work, while others faced alterations in their employment agreements. Additionally, some individuals were enrolled in the Job Retention Scheme due to the closure of certain industries or due to their childcare obligations. Lockdown had a significant impact on single parents, who experienced feelings of loneliness due to the additional caregiving obligations. The distribution of remote work has been unequal, favouring higher-paid workers who can work from home and accommodate additional caregiving duties. According to Muthee (2021), a greater proportion of mothers than dads or workers without

children began taking furlough during the crisis. Additionally, many furloughed employees expressed apprehensions about their future employment opportunities.

### **Gendered Claims-Making across Workplaces**

Variations in claims made based on gender exist throughout different industries. According to the relational inequality approach, organizational inequality regimes reinforce inequality. These regimes exhibit variations in their structure, culture, policies, environment, and history, which allow for the persistence of disparities among different groups within organizations (Kwanya, 2023). Therefore, when it comes to making claims for professional progression, the interpretations of gender and motherhood are discussed and settled inside workplaces, considering the prevailing conventions and ideas about men and women in each specific workplace. Inequality arises from the interaction between distinct categories and external influences, since these elements determine the validity of assertions made by a particular group. In Kenya, there is evidence indicating significant differences in gender-based wage disparities across different workplaces. These disparities are influenced by factors such as workplace segregation, the presence of women in managerial positions, personnel policies, CBAs, work councils, and competition in the product market. This discovery implies that assertions on female career progression may be influenced by both the national and workplace environment, aligning with the idea of relational inequality.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this article is to provide the findings of secondary research and literature evaluations conducted by professionals on the topics of work-family conflict and career advancement. For the purpose of gaining a comprehensive knowledge of the ways in which work-family conflict affects the career development of working moms, previous research and literatures from academics and experts in the field or area were subjected to critical analysis and evaluation. Several credible web sources were consulted in order to get the journals and publications that were used for the research.

### **Results**

One of the traits that strong performers are known to consider is gender. As the number of males in influential roles increases, there is a corresponding increase in the concentration of power inside organisations, favouring men and putting women at a disadvantage. As the number of women in influential roles increases, the old power hierarchy is more significantly disrupted, perhaps leading to more support for women's advancement. Significant disparities in the gender composition of management, together with the existence of a male supervisor, serve as clear indications of a highly gender-based organisation (Dikirr & Omuya, 2023). Therefore, increasing the representation of women in managerial roles and appointing a female supervisor would promote a more equitable organisational structure. If a significant fraction of women is appointed to managerial roles, therefore challenging prevailing gender stereotypes, the research posits that women's ideas about their social standing may be altered via contacts with other influential

women. Consequently, this approach may enhance the sense of empowerment and merit among female workers, so fostering their career progression within an organisation. The increased presence of women in higher positions enhances their visibility, whereas the limited representation of women at the top may give the impression of tokenism.

Women in leadership roles have the ability to mentor and support the career advancement of women in lower-ranking positions. This leads to an increase in the number of women who have the authority to implement fair work practices inside the organisation, which ultimately benefits all female workers (Thumbi, 2019). Building upon these arguments based on deservingness, female employees may expect assistance from influential women within the organisation, leading them to feel more entitled to recognition and more inclined to assert their career advancement. Women can experience empowerment when their workplace exhibits a more equal distribution of demographic representation.

Previous studies have shown the existence of gender-based disadvantages for female workers, particularly in workplaces that are segregated by gender. This indicates that gender stereotypes play a significant role in determining their job outcomes, resulting in lower earnings and limited access to positions of authority. Prior studies further show that increasing the representation of women in senior roles leads to a reduction in gender disparities, including a drop in income gaps and a decrease in gender-based occupational segregation. Female workers may feel more certain in asserting their rights since they may expect to back from the influential women inside the organisation (Wangusi and Abuya, 2019). Similar reasoning applies when women are under the supervision of a female manager, as they see that job advancement is attainable, to a certain degree, and this has a beneficial impact on a woman's self-image. Based on the principle of homophily, women might anticipate receiving assistance from their female bosses during face-to-face contact. In addition, women who are supervised by a female are less prone to encountering biased treatment based on their gender, since it is free from gender preconceptions and prejudice. Consequently, it is expected that the gender disparities in the processing of claims would be diminished.

Nevertheless, the presence of a female supervisor in a workplace that is mostly segregated by gender may not always enhance women's ability to advocate for the advancement of female workers. Despite women having the opportunity to attain higher-ranking jobs, the prevailing workplace attitudes and practices may nevertheless impede their ability to exert influence (Bochere et al., 2021). The drawbacks for female workers might be further exacerbated when just a small number of symbolic women are placed in influential positions. When examining the factors that influence female employees' utilisation of work-life policies provided by their company, researchers found that having a supervisor with significant authority was important. While gender segregation diminishes with the appointment of women to positions of authority, these women are often assigned to lead lower-status female teams. Furthermore, the presence of a female supervisor does not inevitably impact a woman's income level.

## Discussion

The research examines the extent to which the work environment supports female workers in balancing work and family responsibilities. It considers the supportiveness of the work environment as a key factor that influences women's capacity to satisfy the demands of their job as highlighted by Oduol & Cornforth (2019). The research distinguishes between institutional work-life efforts and cultural support for workers' work-life reconciliation, such as assistance from supervisors or colleagues, in order to assess the level of supportiveness in the work environment. Studies suggest that these variables have a significant role in shaping parents' choices about their work behavior. Research has shown the beneficial impact of supervisor assistance on both the work-life balance and working hours of mothers. While there is less research on the topic, it seems that support from coworkers is inversely associated with work-family conflict. Implementing flexible working arrangements in the workplace may facilitate women in maintaining their professional commitments by allowing them to strategically organize their job responsibilities in accordance with their familial obligations.

Men are also given the opportunity to use alternate working arrangements. Both approaches should lead to a reduction in gender disparities in terms of working hours, and productivity which are recognized as valid factors for achieving career advancement. Consequently, women may be more inclined to see career progression as attainable (Amissah, 2021). According to the study, when supporting women in balancing their responsibilities, it goes against the belief that women should prioritize their careers over family obligations. This support shows that a woman's career is supported, even when she has family responsibilities. This should enhance women's sense of entitlement to job advancement, relative to males. Therefore, the research postulates that gender inequalities in asserting claims would diminish in workplace cultures that provide greater support since women are more inclined to be committed to a long-term work engagement.

Empirical data is indicating that work arrangements that are flexible facilitate effective integration of work and family responsibilities since they allow women to organize their work schedule around their familial obligations. Telework has been shown to not only enhance the number of hours that women work upon re-entering the job market after giving birth, but also to improve their level of productivity (Kinoti, 2022). Based on arguments about ability, teleworking mothers can allocate more time and hence see claims related to their job advancement as more valid. Research has also shown that adaptable work arrangements provide a favourable impact on the equilibrium between work and personal life, particularly when coupled with a nurturing work atmosphere. Women expect these attributes in a firm regardless of whether or not they have children. In light of the legitimacy's deservingness component, businesses might provide steps for reconciliation because they value female labor power and are prepared to support women's professional advancement by offering measures that maintain employment for women. This might potentially foster gender egalitarianism by promoting equal support for vocations pursued by both males and females.

Unlike employment in resource-providing organizations, positions in high-performance workplace cultures tend to be more demanding. Prior studies have shown that heightened

worldwide competition, uncertainty, and the need to consistently enhance productivity result in heightened expectations placed on employees, including a high demand for overtime and availability. This has a detrimental impact on an employee's ability to balance work and family responsibilities (Jain & Mahmoodi, 2022). As previously said, excessive job expectations may hurt an employee's personal life, making it difficult to balance work and personal responsibilities. Work environments that prioritize uninterrupted accessibility and extended work hours, while exerting pressure on employees, effectively endorse the concept of the ideal worker standard. This standard dictate that employees should only concentrate on their job responsibilities and refrain from being diverted by personal matters. Telecommuters employed by major Kenyan organizations had more work-life problems when they considered their workplace culture as too demanding. A justifiability-based argument for the adverse impact of a high-pressure work culture on women's assertion of rights is that such organizations place greater emphasis on the concept of an exemplary employee, thereby implying that stereotypes about women, particularly mothers, are prominent in this work setting. Consequently, female professions are undervalued due to the systemic disadvantage that women, particularly mothers, face in terms of career investments that are regarded as acceptable in these settings. Studies suggest that the gender pay gap is somewhat influenced by the increasing financial benefits of working longer hours, particularly via overtime, which males are more inclined to engage in compared to women. various results indicate a high presence of the ideal worker standards in various work situations. In recent decades, Kenya has prioritized promoting gender equality and balancing work and personal life to increase women's participation in the workforce and empower them to achieve economic autonomy. Furthermore, the labour market in Kenya, formerly organized based on the concept of an exemplary worker and a social policy framework that promoted conventional family structures, has undergone substantial transformations, leading to a continuous expansion of its female workforce.

Males who do not have children were found to be the most inclined to seek professional progression, while women with children were shown to be the least inclined to do so, without considering the features of the organization. Although some employment characteristics, such as occupational rank, salary, and having a regular contract, are often associated with opportunity hoarding, they only account for a tiny portion of the gender disparity in claims-making. The diminished probability of women asserting their claims may mostly be attributed to disparities in working hours, including overtime (Bochere et al., 2021). Although recent regulatory measures have been implemented to promote work-life balance, both men and women still see their working hours as a significant factor in determining the credibility of their professional advancement. Engaging in part-time employment, particularly for mothers, seems to indicate their belief that such assertions are less valid since individuals in more prestigious positions are anticipated to work full-time and even extend their working hours - circumstances that are difficult to fulfill when one has familial obligations. These results indicate that workers' perceptions of their capability and entitlement are significant factors in establishing claims for career progression. Furthermore, they indicate the ongoing significance of the ideal worker standard in Kenya.

The gender disparity in claims-making is associated with managers who are supportive of work-

life balance and a work culture that places high demands on individuals. Women who have children are less inclined to seek opportunities for professional progression if their place of employment does not assist in achieving a balance between work and family responsibilities. Nevertheless, the presence of easily accessible work-life assistance from one's supervisor eliminates the gender disparity in asserting claims inside work environments. The research did not see a similar impact among childless mothers. The support may primarily manifest as informal and context-specific assistance, which becomes significant only after the birth of children (Wangusi and Abuya, 2019). Childless women may not prioritize this job attribute while evaluating career advancement. Similarly, a challenging work setting, marked by a significant emphasis on accessibility, extended work hours, and working under stress, amplifies the disparities between genders in asserting claims. Both women with and without children exhibit a decline in claims-making, in comparison to males, while employed in highly demanding employment. Therefore, apart from the resources provided by the government, having resources available at the workplace and a culture that diverges from the conventional expectation of an ideal worker seem to be essential requirements for promoting gender equality in advocating for rights. This discovery provides more evidence to support the assertion that women evaluate their capacity to fulfill the demands of more prestigious positions before asserting their claims. Furthermore, when the prevailing expectation of an ideal worker is debunked, mothers in particular see their aspirations for professional advancement as valid, irrespective of their working hours. The data also indicate the importance of obtaining encouragement from an influential individual, rather than from peers.

Finally, the research claimed that implementing structured human resource procedures and performance assessments might function as mechanisms for women to challenge preconceptions and discriminatory practices inside the business, particularly when they are unfairly judged as undeserving by others. Equipped with these objective markers, women may assert their merit while advocating for job progression. Nevertheless, the assumptions were only partially confirmed by the outcomes of the research. Performance assessments at the workplace enabled women to assert their claims more effectively, perhaps due to their ability to substantiate the validity of their assertions.

A gender structure that is balanced has a significant impact on women's ability to make claims, since it allows them to dedicate more resources to their professional development. Finally, the research reveals that equipping mothers with documented performance assessments may bolster their claims for job improvements, hence providing credibility for their assertions. Providing evidence to support claims of development based on objective measures may enhance women's sense of entitlement to career gains. Nevertheless, this discovery also indicates that mothers must assert their aspirations for professional advancement by making statements, even in the face of their familial responsibilities (Bochere et al., 2021). In contrast to the reduced propensity of mothers to make claims, the research found no disparity. Nevertheless, being employed in a high-pressure work environment is likely to result in disparities in the way men and women without children assert their rights. This phenomenon is believed to be created by women without children who anticipate challenges in satisfying expectations for their working hours, including the

possibility of working extra, in challenging work settings after starting a family. The disparity between genders is further amplified when women without children use telework. Women see telework as a substitute form of recognition for their professional advancement inside the organization, particularly in situations when they do not have children.

### Conclusion

Married couples and single mothers experience many of the same problems with their jobs. As their children grow, parents want to ensure their mental and physical wellbeing by being present for them throughout their growth. Simultaneously, they want the advantages associated with being employed. Nevertheless, families with both parents possess a greater abundance of resources that enable them to overcome challenges more effectively. Single mothers lack the privilege of sharing childcare responsibilities with their spouse, and in some instances, they face unsupportive attitudes and emotions of being endangered by their family and friends. Lacking social support poses challenges in the process of transitioning from assistance to a job and managing the resulting stress.

The fact that many single parents are welfare beneficiaries is a significant determinant of their attitudes towards work. Occasionally, it may serve as a deterrent for employment. In nations with temporal restrictions on welfare benefits, there is a rise in parental re-entry into the workforce. However, a notable proportion remains unemployed and reliant on assistance, so exacerbating their predicament. This strategy is insufficient in addressing all the other obstacles that single parents have in securing work.

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