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Formation of Social Stereotypes Towards Single-Parent Families and Their Impact

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Abstract: This paper examines how social stereotypes towards single-parent families emerge and what consequences they bring for both family members and society at large. Single-parent families have become increasingly common across the globe, yet they continue to face stigmatisation, prejudice, and discriminatory practices. The study traces the origins of these stereotypes from historical, cultural, and media sources. It then analyses their destructive impact on the psychological well-being of single parents and their children, as well as on social policies and institutional practices. Special attention is given to the role of mass media and traditional cultural norms in reinforcing or challenging these stereotypes. The paper draws on sociological surveys, psychological studies, and content analyses of media representations. Findings indicate that negative stereotypes lead to lower self-esteem among single-parent children, reduced access to housing and employment for single mothers, and inadequate legal protection. The conclusion offers recommendations for journalists, educators, and policy makers to deconstruct harmful stereotypes and promote a more accurate, compassionate understanding of family diversity.

Keywords: Single-Parent Families, Social Stereotypes, Stigmatisation, Media Representation, Family Diversity, Social Impact

1. Introduction

The traditional image of a family as a unit consisting of two married parents living with their biological children has long dominated social consciousness. Any deviation from this model has often been labelled as abnormal, problematic, or even dangerous. Among all non-traditional family forms, single-parent families have attracted the strongest negative stereotypes. A single mother or father raising a child alone is frequently seen as incapable, irresponsible, or morally flawed. These assumptions are rarely based on direct evidence. Instead, they are passed down through generations as part of cultural folklore, reinforced by media narratives and institutional practices [1].

The formation of social stereotypes towards single-parent families is not a natural or inevitable process. Stereotypes are constructed through specific social mechanisms: language, education, religious teachings, popular culture, and journalism. When a society repeatedly portrays single parents as victims or villains, these images become internalised by the public. People begin to expect that children from broken homes will become delinquents, that single mothers are poor managers of money, that a man raising children alone must be effeminate or desperate. Such expectations then shape behaviour. Employers hesitate to hire a divorced woman. Landlords refuse to rent apartments to a father with a child. Teachers give lower grades to students from incomplete families, unconsciously acting on their biases [2]. Why does this matter for journalism and mass communications? Because media professionals hold enormous power in shaping public

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perceptions. Every news story about a crime committed by a teenager from a single-parent family, every television drama showing a lonely overworked mother, every talk show discussing the “problem” of incomplete families adds another brick to the wall of stereotype. Conversely, media can also tear down these walls by presenting balanced, diverse, and humanising portraits of single-parent families. Journalists, scriptwriters, and content creators have a responsibility to understand how stereotypes form and how their work contributes either to stigma or to social justice [3].

This paper focuses on the Uzbek context while drawing on international research. In Uzbekistan, the extended family system has historically provided support for single parents. However, urbanisation, labour migration, and rising divorce rates have increased the number of households headed by one parent. According to official statistics, single-parent families now constitute approximately 12 percent of all families in Uzbekistan, with the majority headed by women. Yet social attitudes have not kept pace with demographic reality. Many single mothers report feeling judged by neighbours, relatives, and even state officials. Children from such families often hide their family situation at school for fear of bullying [4].

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, to identify the main sources and mechanisms through which negative stereotypes about single-parent families are generated. Second, to measure the psychological, economic, and social impact of these stereotypes on family members. Third, to propose practical interventions for media professionals, educators, and policy makers to reduce stigma. The research combines a review of existing literature, analysis of media content (newspaper articles, TV programmes, social media posts), and in-depth interviews with twenty single parents living in Tashkent. The following sections present the findings in detail [5].

Main Part

Social stereotypes about single-parent families do not arise from nowhere. Their formation follows a predictable pattern that involves several interconnected factors. The first factor is historical tradition. For centuries, most human societies organised themselves around the married couple as the basic unit of production and reproduction. Widowhood was the only socially acceptable form of solo parenthood. Divorce, abandonment, or out-of-wedlock birth were condemned by religious and secular authorities alike. These historical roots still influence modern thinking, even in increasingly secular societies. People inherit a cultural template that equates “normal family” with “two parents”. Anything else triggers an automatic negative reaction, often without conscious reasoning [6].

2. Materials and Methods

The second factor is media representation. A content analysis conducted for this study examined one hundred articles from Uzbek newspapers published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis showed that single-parent families were mentioned in 22 articles. Among these, 17 articles linked single parenthood with poverty, crime, or child neglect. Only three articles presented a neutral or positive portrayal. Television dramas and social media posts showed a similar pattern. A popular Uzbek TV series depicted a single mother as constantly anxious, financially struggling, and unable to control her teenage son. Such repetitive images create a mental shortcut: whenever people encounter a real single parent, they unconsciously apply the fictional template. The result is prejudice without evidence [7].

3. Results

The third factor is institutional discrimination. Many social policies and organisational rules are designed around the two-parent norm. For example, school forms often ask for “mother’s name” and “father’s name” without allowing for a single guardian. Employers routinely ask women during job interviews whether they are

married or have a husband. Banks require two guarantors for loans, which is harder for a single parent to provide. These seemingly neutral procedures systematically disadvantage single-parent families and reinforce the stereotype that they are unreliable or incapable. When a single mother is denied a loan or a job, she and others attribute the rejection not to the unfair rule but to her own supposed inadequacy [8].

The impact of these stereotypes on single parents themselves is severe. Psychologically, constant exposure to negative judgments leads to internalised shame. Many single mothers report feeling that they are “bad mothers” simply because they live without a partner. They hesitate to attend school meetings, avoid social gatherings, and sometimes even distance themselves from their own extended families. Children are not immune. A study cited in this research surveyed 150 adolescents from single-parent families in Tashkent. More than half admitted that they had lied to friends about their family situation. A third said they felt “less than” their peers from two-parent homes. These feelings of inferiority correlate with lower academic performance and higher rates of anxiety and depression [9].

Economically, stereotypes create a barrier to employment and housing. In a matched-pairs field experiment conducted in 2024, identical job applications were sent to fifty companies in Tashkent. The only difference was that one application mentioned “single mother” in the cover letter, while the other did not. The applications without the single-mother label received callback offers at twice the rate of those with the label. When experimenters later asked employers why they rejected the single mothers, common answers included “she might miss work often” and “she would be too stressed to focus.” No evidence supported these assumptions, yet they guided hiring decisions [10].

Socially, stereotypes isolate single-parent families from community support. Neighbours may gossip rather than help. Relatives may offer criticism instead of childcare. Religious leaders may deliver sermons about the sanctity of marriage that implicitly condemn those who are divorced or never married. As a result, single parents often become socially invisible. They stop participating in community events. They avoid asking for help even when they desperately need it. This isolation, in turn, reinforces the stereotype that single parents are “outsiders” who do not belong [11].

However, not all social stereotypes are uniformly negative. A minority of respondents in this study expressed admiration for single parents, particularly single fathers. A single father raising a child alone is sometimes seen as heroic or unusually devoted. This gendered difference reveals another layer of stereotyping. Single mothers are judged more harshly because society expects women to be nurturing and self-sacrificing. When a woman is alone, she is assumed to have failed in her primary duty. A single father, by contrast, is seen as going above and beyond. Both stereotypes are inaccurate and harmful, but they affect men and women differently [12].

The media’s role in challenging stereotypes is crucial but underdeveloped. Some progress has been made. In 2023, a Uzbek public service announcement featured a successful single mother who owned a small business and raised two children. The campaign was widely shared on social media and received positive feedback. However, such examples remain rare. Most journalists lack training in how to report on family diversity without reinforcing stigma. They use phrases like “broken home” or “incomplete family” without realising the damage such terms cause. A simple guideline would be to ask: “Would I say this about my own family?” If the answer is no, the phrasing needs revision [13].

Educational institutions also have a responsibility. School textbooks rarely show single-parent families as normal and healthy. When they appear, it is often in the context of social problems. Teachers receive no training on how to support children from diverse family structures. A single-parent child who acts out may be labelled as having “family issues” rather than being understood as an individual. Changing this requires curriculum reform, teacher training, and the inclusion of family diversity in early childhood

education. Children need to learn that families come in many forms and that love, stability, and care matter more than parental count [14].

4. Discussion

Finally, legal and policy changes can reduce institutional discrimination. Several countries have adopted “family impact statements” that require policy makers to assess how a new regulation will affect different family types. Uzbekistan could adopt a similar tool. For example, when designing a housing programme, officials should ask whether the rules inadvertently exclude single parents. When drafting labour laws, they should consider whether parental leave policies assume the presence of a second parent. Small changes in wording and procedure can have large effects on reducing stigma and promoting equality [15].

In summary, the main part has shown that social stereotypes towards single-parent families originate from historical traditions, media representations, and institutional practices. These stereotypes cause psychological harm, economic disadvantage, and social isolation. However, targeted interventions in media, education, and law can reverse the damage. The next section concludes with specific recommendations.

5. Conclusion

The formation of social stereotypes about single-parent families is a complex process rooted in history, reinforced by media, and embedded in institutional rules. The impact of these stereotypes is real and measurable: lower self-esteem, reduced employment opportunities, social exclusion, and unequal treatment before the law. Single parents and their children are not inherently more prone to problems; rather, problems arise from the way society treats them. Changing stereotypes is therefore not just a matter of political correctness but a necessary step toward social justice and human well-being.

For media professionals, the recommendation is to adopt ethical guidelines for reporting on family diversity. Avoid terms like “broken home” or “illegitimate child”. Seek out positive stories about single-parent families. Interview single parents as experts on their own lives rather than as objects of pity. For educators, include diverse family structures in curricula and train teachers to recognise and counter their own biases. For policy makers, audit all regulations for hidden discrimination against single-parent families and redesign them to be inclusive. For researchers, continue to study how stereotypes evolve, especially in the digital media environment, and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-stigma campaigns.

This study has several limitations. The sample size for interviews was modest, and all participants were from urban Tashkent. Rural single-parent families may face different challenges. Future research should extend to other regions and include comparative analysis with neighbouring countries. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track how stereotypes change over time in response to media interventions.

In closing, single-parent families are not a social problem to be solved. They are a family form that exists and deserves the same respect, support, and opportunities as any other. Social stereotypes are powerful but not permanent. With conscious effort from journalists, teachers, policy makers, and ordinary citizens, we can replace prejudice with understanding and isolation with solidarity. Every child deserves to grow up without shame about their family. Every parent deserves to be judged by their love and effort, not by their marital status. Achieving this is the task before us.

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