

# THE UNRESERVED CATEGORY: INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES FOR SINGLE PARENTHOOD BEYOND ECONOMIC METRICS

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## ABSTRACT

The term Single Parenthood means a situation where one parent takes up the responsibility for raising his/her child. The reasons behind this can be due to divorce, separation, death of one partner etc. According to UN data in 2023 the percentage of single parenthood has increased in India from 4% in 2015 to 7.5% in 2020. And since the percentage of single parenthood is increasing in India, these single parents are not only suffering from economic hardships but also facing sociological, psychological and Legal – Bureaucratic challenges. As there is a strong correlation between economic hardship with sociological, psychological and legal challenges, thus we can say that the single parents can demand from the government of India to include them under EWS (Economic Weaker Section) category. EWS is a kind of reservation which was implemented in India in 2019 under 103 Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019. This amendment provided 10% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions. Also, this reservation is given to only those people whose annual income is below Rs 8 Lakhs. The exempted from this reservation are OBCs, STs and SCs. Thus, this paper will examine different problems beyond economic hardship faced by the single parents in India. Along with this, the research paper will also analyse the role of EWS reservation in extricating the Single Parents from these intersectional challenges other than economic plight.

*Keyword: Single Parents, Economic Weaker Section, Sociological, Psychological, Amendment*

## INTRODUCTION

Parenthood has always been considered as a blessing for both the couples, where they both performs multiple duties in order to provide a better lifestyle to their children which includes nourishing, guiding and protecting their child. Usually, parent roles are mainly divided among both the parents but in a family where the responsibility of looking after the child falls solely on one person due to death of one partner, divorce, single unmarried adoptive parent, single unmarried biological parent etc. This type of parenting is called as single parenthood or single parents. According to recent statistics, at global level, about 320 million children under 17 years of age have been found living in single parent families and in India, approximately 2.3 million children live with single parents. In context of India, the traditional mindset of our society is such that mother should nurture her child and provide emotional support to the child whereas the father's role is to provide protection and discipline to the child. But in the case of single parents, it is widely observed that the Indian society's mindset regarding single parenthood is heavily influenced by patriarchal norms which results in formation of a vast different perceptions based on gender. Like for single mothers, they face 'stigma' while for single fathers, they are often viewed as 'hero'.

If we talk about single parenting in the Indian context; there are many studies which indicate that single parenting can be associated with several challenges; starting from financial constraints to sociological, psychological and legal aspects. These types of challenges not only impact single parents but it also impacts

their children. Some of the common problems faced by children of single parents are lack of decision making, sense of belongingness, social stigma, emotional regulation etc. There are several reports that confirms that due to low level of income or less job opportunity, single parents in India as well as in world often faces psychological, sociological and legal problems. Thus, in order to resolve these problems, we must address financial instability and empower single parents financially so both they and their children can thrive in this competitive world.

The Indian government under the 103 Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019 introduced EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) reservation which enables 10% quota for EWS in government jobs and educational institutions for those whose annual income is less than Rs 8 lakh, excluding reservation for OBCs, STs and SCs. This study aims that by implementing EWS reservations for single parents can mitigate sociological, psychological and legal challenges.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the empirical research methodology which primarily concentrate on collecting of information or data in order to comprehend the challenges confronted by the single parents beyond economic metrics and subsequently evaluating the incorporation of single parents with Economic Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation.

### 3.1. Societal Judgement on Single Parents: A Sociological Analysis

In India, the society often view single parents through a stigmatized lens but these perceptions are also bifurcated on the gender lines. While single fathers are lauded as hero or brave person for nurturing their children alone; despite facing societal pressure to remarry. But on other side single mothers are considered as the curse on the family; which eventually results them to escape from the questioning eyes of the society. This sparkling debate within the Indian society about consideration of single father as 'hero' while single mother as 'curse', ironically our history tells different story, with many historical personalities who are celebrated as brave single mothers.

Some of the prominent examples are from Mahabharata where Kunti - after her husband's death raised her sons (Pandavas), Sita from Ramayana who raised her twin sons Luv and Kush in exile after being separated from Rama and even contemporary figures like Lata Mangeshkar who after her father's death became single mother to her younger siblings. The sociological problems for the single parents majorly start when their social circles who often coupled earlier with them; may distance themselves now, thus results in social isolation for the single parents; and now they find it very arduous to make new friendship circle. This social isolation often leads to emotional stress, lack of decision-making ability and other mental related issues.

Irrespective of gender biasedness; society even labelled the children of single parents as unlucky and this social stigma force them to navigate their own sociological burdens. This can be analysed by a qualitative research method conducted in Delhi NCR among the college students raised in single parent households, where it was revealed that 82% had additional responsibilities, 91% talked about sense of belongingness and social stigma, and lastly about 73% reported difficulty in emotional regulation. This research clearly highlights the sociological problems faced by children of single parents.

Ultimately the primary sociological challenges faced by both single mother and single father i.e. single mother often suffer from financial vulnerability which means that in Indian society it is believed that men are the breadwinner who struggle all the day to earn for his family thus he deserves to get stable job and satisfy income. But now think in the case of single mother, it is very challenging for them to get stable job as well as good income, along with it their safety at workplace is also at risk. These problems are needed to be sort out in order to uplift single mother in front of male superiority. For single father, even if they are viewed as hero for nurturing the child. It is also true that our society has stereotypical mind that father cannot manage households works, cooking and nurturing of child specially daughter.

### 3.2. Exploring Depression and Anxiety among Single Parents: A Psychological Analysis

The global shift in the family structures has led to the proliferation of single parent households in India. The Indian society's stereotypical views on single parents, easily formulate an idea about the single parents as a victim of depression and anxiety. This situation can be analysed through the lens of Emile Durkheim's suicide theory, specifically the concepts of Egoistic suicide and Anomic suicide.

Egoistic suicide occurs when an individual does not participate in social group, leading to a feeling of isolation and loneliness. In the similar manner, single parents in India often experience lack of social and emotional support which manifests them as psychological distress. Furthermore, Anomic suicide, describes a feeling of lost or confused when societal norms are weakened. This mirrors the experience of single parents navigating for new economic and social challenges without any clear guidance or support from the society as well as from family members. Thus, Emile Durkheim Suicide's theory clearly establishes the direct relation of psychological challenges with the sociological challenges.

The psychological struggles based on gender, mainly create obstacles for the single mothers who are divorced or unwed mothers, they are often viewed as characterless which ultimately led to defensive psychological state and social withdrawal. In India, women's identity is often tied to being a wife, thus losing their own identity lead to low self-esteem. Also, due to the fear regarding their children's marriage without any male "role model", they often suffer from long term anxiety. Conversely the Indian fathers usually fail in nurturing their children, which ultimately lead them to self-doubt and anxiety. Due to the society's expectation from single father, it prevents them from seeking any therapy or emotional support. This awkwardness results in anger or mental problem. The struggle to balance childcare with the professional demands also causes single fathers to suffer from psychological problems.

These psychological burdens inevitably extend to children of single parents who are worried about their house stability. This cultural label of 'broken house' can lead to negative self-image also there is high chance that they start comparing their lives with their school/college peers who have both parents. It is every child's dream to receive love and emotional support from their parents. However, in the case of single parents, children merely receive love or emotional support due to their parent's busy schedule. Unfortunately, this lack of emotional support from their parent can affect child's academic performance and eventually contribute to mental health issues.

### 3.3. Legal Barriers for Single Parents: A Core Issue in India's Legal System

In the Indian legal system, single parents encounter with formidable barriers ranging from complex documentation, restrictive guardianship and custody laws, challenges in adoption or lack of paternity leave. While analysing these obstacles through the gender lens, it is apparent that single mothers often bear huge burden, due to the mandatory requirement of "Father's Name" on essential documents like birth certificate, school admission forms, passports etc. Although the landmark case of ABC vs The State (NCT of Delhi) affirmed that single mother can serve as the sole legal guardian without disclosing father's identity. but despite Supreme Court ruling, many local authorities and schools still ask for Father's Name, leading to repeated legal battles.

The Indian Legislature has always been criticized for introducing guardianship and custody laws through the eyes of patriarchy society and it evident under Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 where the father is considered as the “natural guardian” even before mother. Even after the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 single mothers face legal hurdles while adopting child. Also, since the non-Hindu single women are not allowed for adopting child according to their personal laws, they move towards Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 but unfortunately this act establishes guardianship rather than full legal parent child relationship. Thus, the non-Hindu single women face confusion.

The updated guidelines from the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) allows single women to adopt children of any gender. Furthermore, it has also been observed that the adoption agency does a lot of evaluations regarding single women’s work – life and their ability to raise a child alone. The reports in 2024 indicates that about 35% of single women applicants gets delay due to the excessive documentation requirements. CARA also enforces strict age limits for the single women, thus preventing women over 45 from adopting children under four years old.

Conversely, the single father’s legal problems often distinct from single mother’s legal problem. Under the visitation and parental alienation, the custodial parent restricts access or influences child against them. Additionally, the legally enforcing visitation rights is a slow process and single fathers spend years in court only to secure few hours of supervised visitation per month. Lastly the single father faces gender based biasedness during adoption as India obstructs single father to adopt girl child thus resulting legal barrier for men who are wishing to become single father of girl child.

#### **3.4. EWS – A Framework for Resolving Single Parent’s Sociological, Psychological and Legal Problems**

The reservation system in India is historically rooted in addressing the social and educational backwardness. However, a significant shift has occurred with the introduction of EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) reservation. This policy provides 10% quota in government jobs and educational institutions for those people whose annual income is less than Rs 8 lakh, excluding for OBCs, STs and SCs. Just as EWS economically uplift the weaker section, it can also serve as vital support for single parents who face sociological, psychological and legal problems. Since there is well documented correlation between economic hardship and psychological, sociological and legal challenges. Thus, if the government of India extends EWS reservation to include single parents, then such policy could facilitate not only their economic upliftment but also the other intersectional challenges faced by them.

Single Parents, majorly women often face the double burden of low paying jobs and restricted to access quality education. Thus, by utilizing 10% quota in educational institutions like IITs or IIMs and other central universities, these single parents specially women can access quality education which fortunately get them with good job along with high remuneration. Furthermore, if the government provides scholarships to the children of single parents in educational institutions, it will not only motivate children but also reduce psychological burden on both single parent and children.

EWS reservation empowers single parents to make independent decisions regarding their children’s future without depending on any extended family members. This autonomy is needed for sociological as well as psychological well-being for both single parent and child. Additionally, providing job security, health benefits and pensions by the government to the single parents through EWS policy, it will provide psychological peace to them. While policy alone cannot instantly change society’s mindset but with the economic success achieved through EWS can mitigate the social stigma and derogatory comments on single parents. As they achieve success in their life, the societal perception tends to shift from judgemental to respect.

In order to solve legal problems face by single parents, the government can use EWS as a gateway to for financial empowerment and legal aid. Legal battles regarding child custody, maintenance and inheritance are quite expensive due to high court fees and lawyer fees. The other associated costs can be prohibitive for single

parents specially by those who have limited or no income. Thus, a stable well-paying job secured through EWS will provide financial independence which ultimately fulfil these services. Furthermore, The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 which mandates private unaided schools reserve at least 25% of seats for children from "economically weaker sections" and "disadvantaged groups." Thus, single parent who qualifies for EWS can leverage this reservation to secure a school admission for their child and other legalistic demands for paternal information. The EWS certificate serves as a valid proof of the child's economic background.

Finally, EWS quota can grant priority in government housing or any property schemes which is very crucial for the single parent, particularly one who may have been dispossessed of their marital property or victim of domestic violence. Lastly, by providing EWS certificate, it can be a gateway to other government schemes and financial assistance programs, such as scholarships, loans, and other social welfare initiatives. This financial safety allows a single parent to focus on legal matters without the constant stress of economic precarity.

### 3.5. Conclusion

This research paper urges the government of India to extend the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) reservation policy by including single parents under it. While under the 103<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019, this policy was designed to provide economic relief through 10% quota in government jobs and educational institutions for those people whose annual income is less than Rs 8 lakh. But since there is a profound correlation between economic stability and sociological, psychological and legal challenges, thus there is urgent need for change in the policy. By securing economic stability, single parents can overcome social stigma, reduce their psychological distress and can also meet up with the costs of legal battles regarding custody, guardianship and other legal documents.

Furthermore, extending the EWS reservation benefits to the single parent's children through scholarships and the Right to Education Act can alleviate the sociological, psychological and specially the academic burdens from which they suffer from. This EWS reservation for Single Parents will act as a weapon in curving out societal perception from judgment to respect. "Thus, it will not only improve their living condition but it will also sensitize society to the fact that single parents are also the part of our community and posses an equal right to live their life with dignity just like everyone else."

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