
Experiences of Unemployed Single Mothers in Women-Headed Households in Collins Chabane Municipality: Insights From a Social Work Perspective

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Abstract: This study explored the experiences of unemployed single mothers leading women-headed households in Madonsi village, Collins Chabane. The study aimed at investigating the effects of unemployment on the mental health of single mothers. Unemployment exacerbates mental health challenges among single mothers while simultaneously fostering resilience strategies in coping with economic adversity. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how unemployment affected the mental health of this demographic, to inform policy and support programs. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and employed an exploratory research design. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with unemployed single mothers heading women-headed households to provide rich, personal insights into the phenomenon of unemployment. The study used thematic analysis. The study population comprised unemployed single mothers leading households. Non-probability sampling was adopted, with a purposive sampling method/technique used to select participants for the study. Ethical principles were upheld by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study. Findings indicated that while unemployment posed significant mental health challenges, many participants demonstrated remarkable resilience by leveraging community resources and building supportive relationships. The study used resilience and systems theory to provide a basis and foundation. These theories were fundamental in providing the background that guided the study's direction.

Keywords: mental health; resilience; single mothers; unemployed; women

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Introduction and background

Unemployment is a complex problem that has a significant influence on not just financial security but also mental health and general well-being, especially for single mothers (Wright & Lee, 2020). Single mothers encounter difficulties when they lose their jobs or remain unemployed for an extended period, as they often manage household and childcare duties without a spouse's support (Verma & Tiwari, 2021). The social shame associated with unemployment, gender norms, and the financial strain of raising children alone all exacerbate the psychological effects of unemployment on single mothers (Barker & Metcalfe, 2020). Many single mothers

show incredible resilience in the face of these challenges, overcoming hardship with fortitude, flexibility, and tenacity. Supporting the mental health and general well-being of unemployed single mothers requires understanding the factors that contribute to this resilience, which is not experienced by everyone (Wolff & Johnson, 2019).

The effects of unemployment are especially harsh for single mothers, but it is a significant stressor in life that impacts people of all backgrounds (Smith & Davis, 2016). Unemployment-related financial instability and psychological discomfort are crippling when paired with the burden of single parenthood (Fletcher et al., 2019). According to Masten (2018), during times of unemployment, single mothers experience a high increase in stress, feelings of shame, and inadequacy because they are frequently solely responsible for providing for their children. Unemployment-related financial strain can intensify these emotions, which can have detrimental effects on the mother's mental health as well as the children's well-being (Williams, 2018).

A variety of mental health issues are associated with the experience of losing one's work for many unemployed single mothers. Doran and Van der Meer (2018) indicate a strong correlation between unemployment and low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. For single mothers who must deal with the psychological effects of unemployment as well as the emotional strain of carrying out their parental responsibilities without the material or emotional support of a spouse, these mental health conditions can be especially crippling. Furthermore, single mothers may feel alone because they are frequently cut off from larger social networks that could offer them monetary and emotional support (Barker & Metcalfe, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these significant obstacles, many single mothers demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. According to psychological research, resilience is the ability to bounce back quickly from setbacks and to adjust positively in the face of stress or adversity (Masten, 2018). For single mothers, resilience can take many forms, such as managing stress, maintaining a positive attitude, and continuing to provide care despite financial hardship (Fletcher et al., 2019). The factors contributing to resilience are diverse and complex, and research shows that personal qualities such as optimism, self-efficacy, and problem-solving skills are crucial to promoting resilience (Connolly & Doucet, 2020).

In addition to individual factors, social support networks and external resources are essential in promoting resilience among unemployed single mothers. Research indicates that women who have strong social support from family, friends, or community networks are more likely to experience better mental health outcomes during unemployment (Williams, 2018). Social support provides emotional comfort, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for maintaining mental health and well-being (McMillan and Brown, 2018). Furthermore, access to social services such as unemployment benefits, mental health counselling, and Child Support Grant (CSG) alleviates the burden of financial instability, providing a foundation for emotional recovery (Leahy & McCrory, 2021).

The current study is pertinent to social work because unemployment can lead to financial difficulties, including the inability to maintain a standard of living, pay bills, or afford necessities. It can also cause social isolation and feelings of alienation from friends, family, and the community for unemployed women. Social workers can help unemployed women who are feeling stressed and emotionally affected by unemployment by offering counselling and emotional support. Since unemployment affects people directly in a variety of ways, it is extremely significant to the field of social work. According to Maitoza (2019) report, unemployment may lead to financial instability and disrupt relationships. The social workers in this position will be able to support them as they work through the unemployment crisis by providing advocacy, counselling, and assistance in accessing social resources.

This study aims to investigate the resilience of unemployed single mothers leading women-households, with a particular emphasis on the psychological effects of unemployment and the coping strategies that allow some women to flourish in the face of adversity. By analysing the mental health effects of unemployment, including the roles of personal attributes, social support, and external resources, this study aims to identify the factors that help unemployed single mothers maintain their emotional well-being. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the lived experiences of unemployed single mothers in women-headed households in Collins Chabane Local Municipality and to generate insights that can inform responsive interventions within Social Work practice.

Theoretical framework

Resilience theory is one of the fundamental theoretical frameworks that provides the foundation and background for this study. Helping professionals like social workers and psychologists play an important role in helping unemployed single mothers cope with adversity (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008). The unemployed single mothers leading families are exposed to stress, poverty and depression, but many can bounce back and function efficiently despite adversity. This theory argues that single mothers can experience difficulties and find ways to function efficiently (Masten, 2014). The concept of resilience was developed during World War II and remains relevant today. Resilience theory provides a framework for understanding how people can function before, during, and after exposure to stress, poverty, and unemployment. Resilience exists when there are stressful conditions, psychological pressure, mental health problems and adversity (Watson et al., 2006).

Resilience theory explains how unemployed single mothers leading households can cope with and address extremely stressful situations. Single mothers who can provide for their children despite adversity and challenges are categorised as resilient (McAllister & McKinnon, 2009). Single mothers need to be resilient when dealing with adversity and exposure to stressful conditions and be able to bounce back and manage the needs of their children. Not all single mothers can be resilient; some can develop resilience traits and function well after exposure to difficulties. While others are unable to function well, others fail to maintain good mental health and end up being depressed and traumatised.

Systems theory was the other theory applied in the study. It emphasises a context over particular issues or individuals. An interdisciplinary theory, systems theory covers all systems in nature, society, and numerous scientific domains. It also provides a framework for conducting comprehensive, holistic investigations of events (Mele et al., 2010). In systems theory, behaviour is influenced by many interrelated components that function as a system (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Throughout the study, this theory helped the researcher examine each participant's environment, economic level, sexual orientation, and familial and social relationships. By employing systems theory, the researchers identified additional factors in people's attitudes and behaviours.

Researchers should view systems as a whole composed of interconnected parts (Stewart, 2019). Transforming the general idea into a useful research methodology is not without its difficulties. Systemic models infer understanding of processes from the relationships between system components. Additionally, systems theory aided the researcher in understanding the systems and factors influencing the unemployed, as it equally emphasises the relationships between organisations, the interdependence of their constituent parts, and their relationships with their environment (Chih-Hui & Lin, 2017). The connection of resiliency to the research problem thus enables the study to explore the coping mechanisms of women navigating chronic socio-economic stressors such as unemployment, poverty, and childcare, and to determine the protective resources that can sustain household well-being. The theoretical approach offers a valuable model of resilience within marginalised households and provides input for informed, responsive Social Work interventions to enhance family and community support forces.

Literature review

Unemployment trends and patterns in South Africa

Women are expected to be 27% less likely than men to enter the workforce worldwide, according to estimates from the International Labour Organization (2016). They have fewer job options and lower participation rates, which negatively affect their ability to earn a living and their financial security. Levendale (2017) claims that a significant portion of the South African population has left the labour force, with 51% of people aged 15 to 64 being female, yet only 45% of them are employed.

Causes of unemployment

Inadequate to proper education

A major cause of unemployment is a lack of education. Lack of access to high-quality education makes it difficult for many people to find jobs that match their qualifications and skill set (Mehmood et al., 2021). A

sizable section of the populace is unemployed because of this. Inadequate access to high-quality education and vocational training programs is the root cause of low economic productivity and skill development among the public. This shows that most people's inability to find productive jobs leads to long-term unemployment.

Inadequate training for occupations may prevent people from finding employment, and a lack of requisite skills is another factor contributing to unemployment (Matos et al., 2022). If these are absent, people may have difficulty finding work (Radhika, 2022). As a result, when people lack the necessary skills and talents, they will face several difficulties when implementing strategies and tactics.

Lack of necessary skills

A lack of necessary skills also causes unemployment, and individuals may be unable to find jobs because they are not adequately trained (Matos et al., 2022). The lack of these skills can lead individuals to experience difficulties obtaining employment opportunities (Radhika, 2022). Hence, when individuals lack the competencies and abilities, they will encounter problems and challenging situations when putting the methods and approaches into practice.

Increase in population

Population growth is one of the primary factors thought to contribute to difficulties in obtaining employment opportunities. People see getting work opportunities as their top priority, regardless of their neighbourhoods, backgrounds, or categories (Kassem et al., 2019). As the population grows, the labour force expands, leading to increasing competition for available employment. This is especially challenging for women, who already face systemic barriers in the labour market (Otekhile & Zeleny, 2016). In places with rapidly growing populations, demand for labour sometimes outpaces supply, leading to higher unemployment rates.

Lack of resources

Resource accessibility is a major issue in South Africa. Many people do not have access to the resources, such as money, technology, and mentors, that would help them land a good job (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015). The absence of government investment in the industrial and agricultural sectors has also negatively impacted employment prospects. As a result, there is little incentive for the private sector to create jobs, leading to an increase in the youth unemployment rate (Oluwajodu et al., 2015).

Mental health implications experienced by rural-based unemployed single mothers

Zulkarnain (2020) asserts that mental health is negatively impacted by both unemployment and poor-quality employment. Numerous studies have shown that being unemployed, defined as not having a job but actively seeking one, has a detrimental impact on the health of several women. Unemployment can have a detrimental effect on mental health in several ways. These include the stigma associated with unemployment and the stress and low self-esteem that come with not having a regular job structure (Herron et al., 2020). Women experience stress due to financial difficulties, instability, and a decreased possibility for future wages, all of which are detrimental to their health. The social security system itself is another mechanism that may hurt mental health because of the claims process and the conditions surrounding job searches (Ward & Merlo, 2016). Research on the effects of unemployment on women's physical, mental, and life satisfaction health showed that these effects deteriorated over time (Herron et al., 2020).

Rural unemployed women face mental health issues due to several factors, including social isolation, limited access to resources, financial strain, and deeply rooted gender stereotypes in rural communities (Ward & Merlo, 2016). In addition, the smaller population and fewer social opportunities in rural areas often leave women without jobs feeling lonely and alone. This is especially true for unemployed women who do not frequently interact with people outside of their homes (Solmi & Dykxhoorn, 2017). According to Leagjeld (2019), women who have traditionally defined themselves through their work or contributions to their families and communities may experience a loss of identity and purpose due to unemployment. Rural unemployed women often must balance several duties, including childcare, housework, and caring for elderly family members, because the respite that comes with working outside the home is lacking. This adds to their high levels of stress and overwhelm (Leagjeld et al., 2021).

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach. This approach was critical because the researcher sought to understand respondents' attitudes, experiences, and feelings in their natural settings (Habib, 2022). An exploratory research design was adopted to provide a basis and background for the research study (Lapan et al., 2015). The researchers used an exploratory research design to explore participants' understanding of their resilience as unemployed single mothers leading households. The researchers provided a clear description of the interview details (Matthew & Ross, 2018). The inclusion criteria included single mothers leading women-headed households. These women should reside in Madonsi village, Malamulele, in Collins Chabane Local Municipality.

The study adopted non-probability sampling, with purposive sampling used to select the participants for the research. Purposive sampling was used because the researcher knew the participants. A face-to-face semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. The study targeted 10 unemployed single mothers leading women-households (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). The participants had begun repeating information submitted by others. This led to the termination of data collection due to data saturation. The study used English during data collection, and all participants were comfortable with it. The average period spent with the participants was 30 min (Matthew & Ross, 2018).

The ethical principles were critical in the study to ensure respect for the participants and maintain the integrity of the research (Polit & Beck, 2014). The researchers ensured that participants were informed about their participation in the study, the risks and benefits, and the recording of the interviews. Participants provided consent for their records by signing the consent forms. Consent was provided for the audio recording of the interviews (Resnik 2018). Participants were informed that there would be no compensation for their participation in the study. Confidentiality was the key principle observed in the study, ensuring that the information obtained was not compromised or divulged to anyone (Moreno et al., 2018). Anonymity was important to protect participants' personal information, and the researchers used pseudonyms to identify them. The participants correct names were not used to protect them from any harm or undue pressure. Given the sensitive nature of discussing unemployment, mental health, and household poverty, potential psychological risks were carefully considered. The study also acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship; strategies such as building rapport, ensuring confidentiality, and conducting interviews in safe, private settings were employed to minimise discomfort and encourage honest disclosure.

The study used a thematic analysis as an extensively utilised technique to recognise and explain patterns in qualitative data. Thematic Analysis was used as the main analytical method, conducted systematically, with data familiarisation through repeated reading of the interview transcripts (Ahmed et al., 2025). Primary codes were created to capture meaningful aspects of participants' experiences as unemployed single mothers in women-headed families in Collins Chabane Local Municipality. The primary researchers coded the data, thereby improving analytical rigour. The coded data were then contrasted and debated to address any discrepancies and enhance consistency, thereby improving reliability in the interpretation process. After the coding phase, similar codes were collapsed into general categories, on which global themes were derived to capture common trends in the data.

Findings and discussion

The researchers verified participant remarks on the topic under investigation by using exact quotes from the participants. The study's conclusions are validated using literature control (Creswell, 2014). By identifying gaps in the body of knowledge and emphasising the study's contribution to the field, literature control helped the researcher situate their work within the broader academic context. The researcher conducted detailed, redundant research and ensured that the contribution provides novel insights into viewpoints. Literature control allows

Table 1. Biographical information.

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest Grade Passed	Period of Unemployment
Participant A	32	Female	XiTsonga	Grade 12	+ 5 Years
Participant B	36	Female	XiTsonga	Grade 12	+ 1 Year
Participant C	44	Female	XiTsonga	Grade 12	+ 4 Years
Participant D	52	Female	XiTsonga	Grade 12	+ 10 Years
Participant E	31	Female	XiTsonga	Grade 12	+ 4 Years

researchers to identify and adopt relevant theoretical frameworks that can guide their study and support their hypotheses (Booth et al., 2016).

Furthermore, all participants were Tsonga-speaking people living in the Vhembe district and the surrounding area of Malamulele. Interviews were conducted in English to ensure both parties understood. However, the use of English during the interview did not disrupt the session or have any negative effect on it. The participants demonstrated understanding of the question through their responses. The information above is presented in the table below.

This part presents an examination of the themes that emerged from the researcher's data collection. Themes were generated after the interview transcripts were analysed. The study's findings revealed the following themes in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Study themes.

This research explored the lives of unemployed single mothers in women-headed families in Collins Chabane Local Municipality and how unemployment influences their well-being and family life. The major themes were the definition of unemployment, the psychological impact of unemployment, the economic strain on parenting and family dynamics, and support systems and networks. The results indicate that monetary insecurity and continuous unemployment are some of the factors that cause stress, anxiety, and depression, besides affecting parent-child relations and household operations. Social, familial, and community support proved to be an important buffer, highlighting the interplay between individual coping mechanisms and social resources beyond the individual in influencing resilience and well-being.

Theme 1: Defining the concept 'unemployment'

The research findings outline various definitions of unemployment and related concepts. The majority of participants indicated that unemployment involves not working. The research found that unemployed people define the term differently, for example, thinking that one can be unemployed while highly educated, which may be due to the level of education one holds. The findings of the study reveal that in the definition of unemployment, when you stay at home, not working, there are sufferings that are linked with it. Participant D defined unemployment.

"Eh, the term unemployment, we talk about those people who are not getting anything from anywhere, firstly, people who are not working, this person did not have eh a work or a job." PD

"Another thing we are talking about is a person who is looking for a job but did not get the job, thirdly, we are talking about a person who is unemployed because he has lots of qualifications, e.g. he has a diploma, an honours degree, but he is not working." PG

“Unemployment, according to my understanding, is like a person who is not working and does not have an income at all, but there is still suffering and staying at home”. PB

“The term unemployment, I think, is where an individual is not working, is not having eh any income that is coming in his or her side”. PE

Blustein et al. (2020) gave a similar definition of unemployment: “Unemployment is when an individual does not have a job and has lately looked for one for employment.” This confirms that the root cause of many social and economic problems is unemployment, as unemployed or underemployed women cannot provide for themselves and their families.

Theme 2: Psychological impact of unemployment

According to the study, unemployment causes great emotional strain, particularly for single mothers, who are often responsible for more caregiving and household management. Parental stress results in emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, which may affect a single mother’s ability to keep their children’s lives normal. Unemployed single mothers in women-headed families are more likely than men to report feeling anxious, depressed, and stressed, and these feelings stem from both the financial insecurity that comes with unemployment and the pressure that society places on women to fulfil caregiving responsibilities. These psychological experiences, however, varied among participants. The availability of social support, finances, household size, and extended family networks, among other factors, determined differences. Individuals who reported stronger family or community support systems seemed to cope with the emotional burden more easily, suggesting the protective effect of relational resources.

Furthermore, when single mothers experience high levels of stress due to unemployment, it hurts their parenting style, causing inconsistent caregiving, emotional withdrawal, or overprotection. Such variations could be seen in the context of the Resilience Theory as the differences in the degree of protective factors that could help individuals change in response to adversity. These findings thus indicate that the psychological distress in unemployed single mothers is not only determined by personal situations, but also by larger socio-economic and relational conditions, which affect the degree to which women can activate coping strategies and support systems. The following participants supported that.

"Every day feels like I am carrying this huge weight. It is not just about the money, but the worry that my kids might notice how stressed I am. I cannot sleep, and I always feel anxious, like I am constantly failing." PE

"It is hard not to feel like you are just not good enough when struggling to find work. I have been unemployed for months and feel like I have lost my sense of purpose." PC

Higher levels of psychological discomfort are often associated with unemployment, particularly among single women. There is growing evidence that women who are unemployed and unmarried have higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression than men do (Johnson et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021). Feelings of helplessness and a decline in self-worth are caused by being unemployed as the family’s head of household/provider (Rogers & He, 2020). A major psychological load is guilt, which arises from both perceived inadequacies in supporting the family and an incapacity to cater for the emotional needs of children (Moore & Howe, 2023). Unemployed single women frequently experience emotional exhaustion, which affects their interactions with their children and can cause them to become withdrawn, anxious, or inconsistent in caregiving (Das, 2020).

Theme 3: Economic strain and mental health

The results indicate that the inability to pay for basic living expenses causes a great deal of anxiety, not only about big expenses but also about small, everyday things like groceries, which highlights the ongoing anxiety of not knowing if one can cover essential needs. The mental toll of such worry can significantly interfere with daily functioning and contribute to depression. It also revealed that Participant D experienced continuous financial stress, which, when paired with an inability to manage fundamental financial consequences (such as not being able to buy groceries or keep the lights on), results in a sense of powerlessness. This sense of powerlessness is closely related to learned helplessness, a psychological condition in which people believe they cannot alter

their situation, despite their best efforts. According to the Resilience Theory, these results indicate that the duration of economic adversity is a powerful risk factor that can undermine individuals' adaptive potential when safeguarding resources (including social support, economic stability, and community support) is scarce. Subsequently, the findings indicate the need to re-establish social and institutional support networks within the community, such as the Collins Chabane Local Municipality, to improve resilience and uphold the psychological well-being of unemployed single mothers.

"The bills pile up, and there is never enough. I find myself worrying about the smallest things. Can we afford groceries? Will the lights stay on this month? It is just exhausting mentally and physically." PD

"I have tried cutting back everywhere, but it does not seem to help. Not having a steady income makes me feel like I am failing my children." PA

The study's findings are supported by the following literature: Women who lose their jobs are more likely than men to report higher levels of anxiety and depression (Wilson & Edwards, 2022). This is mainly because single women frequently play two roles: taking care of their families and working, which adds to their stress when unemployment affects both facets of their identities. As people worry about meeting their basic needs, economic strain, especially from unemployment, can cause chronic stress (Schaufeli et al., 2019). According to Sandel et al. (2020), women without jobs report much higher levels of ongoing stress than women with jobs. According to Rees et al. (2022), women who experience ongoing financial hardship are also more likely to experience emotional burnout, in which their capacity to manage other facets of life, including work, family, and social interactions, is weakened.

The research unequivocally demonstrates that women's mental health is significantly and frequently negatively impacted by the financial hardship caused by unemployment. Because of the interlocking stresses of caregiving obligations, financial instability, and societal expectations of motherhood and financial supply, women are disproportionately impacted by unemployment. Women without jobs often experience anxiety, melancholy, stress, and maternal guilt as psychological effects of economic distress.

Theme 4: Impact on parenting and family dynamics

It is revealed by the study that it is difficult to live around poverty and unemployment as a woman in rural areas. As a result, it is tough for women to keep up with the standards of their kids and family members. Unemployment on the family as it leaves out too much pressure that leads to stress on women, and they mostly feel guilt for not being able to provide for their families. Women still play a pivotal role in protecting their family members from acquiring stress that they face as individuals without jobs. The study further revealed that there are somatic symptoms that are associated with unemployment in the lives of women, and these somatic symptoms, which are a direct result of chronic stress brought on by economic uncertainty, include headaches, exhaustion, and disturbed sleep. Parents become irritable, anxious, or depressed because of the financial insecurity brought on by unemployment, and this affects how they interact with their kids. Grounded in Systems Theory, the findings imply that unemployment does not have an individual impact on women. However, rather than through the family's interconnectedness, the emotional and economic issues that mothers face can influence the functioning of the whole family and parent-child bonds.

"It is hard for my kids to keep things normal when I am stressed all the time. I try to shield them from the stress, but they still ask questions like, 'Why don't we go on vacations like other families?' It breaks my heart." PA

"It is difficult, and I feel like I am failing my family and children. I feel guilty when I see my family going to bed hungry." PB

"Sometimes I am too tired or upset to spend time with my kids. I know it is not good for them, but I do not have the energy. I feel guilty about it every day." PE

According to Bourne and Singleton (2021), unemployment can lead to increased stress, parenting difficulties, and changes in family responsibilities, all of which affect the family's emotional and financial stability and the well-being of children. According to Barker and Metcalfe (2020), unemployed parents frequently feel less

effective in their parenting role, which may affect their capacity to provide their children with continuous attention and emotional support. Fletcher et al. (2019) found that women, in particular, who are unemployed frequently experience emotions of guilt and inadequacy, especially if they are unable to meet their children's fundamental needs. This results in a reduction in the quality of parenting that these parents deliver. The work status of parents has a significant impact on their children's well-being. McLoyd (2022) asserts that children of jobless parents are more likely to face behavioural issues, emotional anguish, and academic challenges.

Theme 5: Support systems and network

The remarks of the unemployed women the researcher interviewed revealed this theme. They were asked to list the community programs or sources of support that helped them during their unemployment. In one of their combined responses, they summarised that there is no community support. (1) A lack of community support is the subtheme.

Lack of community support

The term "community support" refers to a group of people in a community coming together to help those who would otherwise struggle to meet their everyday needs, such as the elderly or people with disabilities. The researcher found that the community previously had projects assisting unemployed people, but these projects are no longer active. The unemployed single mother in women-headed households of Madonsi finds no support during their period of unemployment. There is no minimal support that the unemployed single parent receives. For example.

"They sometimes have some projects, but not every year. Let us take a look at trends this year; there were no projects limo. All unemployed people there were not having jobs at all". PA

"Uh, in my community, we do not have that much support as youth; only we manage by having grant children (hm). Yes, the rest, we do not do anything because the money, even though it is for kids, is small, according to my understanding." PH

"I do not want to lie, because eh here around Madonsi, when it comes to the system of helping others, if you are not in the ANC, you are not getting anything. If you are not closer to the counsellors, you are not getting anything, and if you are not in a position where you can, eh, speak with the people who are in the communities and committees, you are not getting anything. So if you are in, you are a member of ANC, which is better because sometimes when it comes to the food parcels, they can include you, but it is not simple to get food". PJ

The participant mentioned that the projects are not often released or given out each year. However, the literature agrees that unemployment is a sad reality that, among other things, often requires social support to overcome (Fieseler et al., 2014). Having supportive relationships makes being unemployed easier, since feeling cut off from society, losing large chunks of social networks, and missing out on social opportunities are among the worst parts of being unemployed. The literature confirms that, to combat unemployment and poverty, local governments should launch initiatives such as the Community Work Programme (CWP), which provides the impoverished with a safety net by offering a monthly stipend while also empowering communities through work and skill development (Adetiba & Qwabe, 2020).

Discussion

Unemployment is a state in which people who can work and actively seek work are unable to find employment, which often has negative social and psychological effects. According to the research findings, unemployment has a significant psychological impact, exacerbating mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression, by causing emotions of helplessness, humiliation, and low self-esteem. Unemployment is linked to a loss of routine, structure, and social identity; this strain is not just economic in nature due to financial instability but also social. The results also demonstrated that unemployment disrupts parenting and family dynamics for couples, as financial hardship causes stress, disagreement, and limited access to resources, all of which affect the health of partners and children. Parents' emotional availability and parenting style are also affected by guilt or fear related to their inability to provide. As a result, support networks and structures are essential for mitigating the negative impacts of unemployment by providing both tangible aid, such as financial support, and emotional support,

which helps people stay resilient and cope with the stress that comes with it. How people handle unemployment difficulties is greatly influenced by the presence or absence of support networks.

Recommendations

The study's findings on the resilience of unemployed single mothers shed light on the major obstacles these women face and the coping strategies that support their mental well-being during financial hardship. Considering these findings, the following recommendations are made to legislators, government agencies, leaders, and social workers to enhance the resilience and mental health of unemployed single mothers.

Social workers should prioritise building trust with single mothers by offering ongoing support through case management services, counselling, and community resources. Every day, social workers significantly impact the communities they serve. For the community, and particularly unemployed women, access to social service professionals is crucial. Development and improvement initiatives are needed to support local women struggling with unemployment. Social workers must undertake outreach activities to provide unemployed women in the community with the information they need about resources and employment prospects.

Future studies must examine the effects to comprehend the stressful nature of unemployment and devise solutions to alleviate women's unemployment in rural areas while also improving the user experience for unemployed women.

Socialisation is greatly aided by social participation. Given the research findings, women living in rural areas should seize the opportunity to network within their communities. Unemployed women should get involved in the community, as it offers networking opportunities that may lead to employment.

Although the study highlights the high socio-economic and psychological issues that unemployed single mothers in women-headed households face, its theoretical contribution could be strengthened by grounding the findings in Resilience Theory. The findings demonstrate that resilience among this group is not a single aspect but a product of the interaction among personal coping skills, family, and community support systems. This extends the traditional use of resilience theory, illustrating how structural poverty and enduring unemployment may limit adaptive capacities, indicating that resilience is contextually contingent and not universally consistent.

In practice, specific, evidence-based social work interventions are required beyond general outreach. Among the possible recommendations are the implementation of structured financial literacy courses, support groups for single mothers with community representatives, and the introduction of psychosocial measures to help reduce chronic stress and develop coping mechanisms. This would involve concerted action among social services, local government, and community organisations, as well as effective resource allocation and monitoring systems to ensure efficacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resilience of unemployed single mothers in the face of unemployment's significant psychological and economic challenges is a critical area of exploration in understanding how women navigate the complexities of both motherhood and financial instability. This study emphasised the significant negative effects of unemployment on single mothers' mental health, such as elevated stress, anxiety, and depression levels. It also emphasised how resilient many single mothers are despite these challenges. Their capacity to endure hardship largely depends on the coping mechanisms they use, such as seeking emotional support, developing inner strength, and using local resources. The financial burden and caring duties that unemployed single mothers frequently experience combine to create a complicated interplay of internal and environmental factors that affect their mental health. Financial aid, mental health treatments, and social support systems greatly strengthen these women's tenacity. According to the study, although external resources can greatly reduce mental health burdens, personal resilience, including optimism and self-efficacy, emerges as a critical component in reducing the adverse impacts of unemployment.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology by integrating views on unemployed single mothers living in women-headed families in Collins Chabane Local Municipality. The study draws on knowledge from Social Work, Sociology, Gender Studies, and Development Studies to examine the socio-economic and psychosocial factors shaping the lives of unemployed single mothers. It explored problems such as poverty, unemployment, caregiving issues, and the availability of social support structures in women-led families. By incorporating these disciplinary lenses, the study provides a holistic insight into the effects of structural inequalities, gendered responsibilities, and limited financial means on the lived experiences of unemployed single mothers and their families, to inform more responsive social work interventions and community support strategies.

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