

# UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE ROLE TRANSITION OF SINGLE MOTHERS: A CONTEXTUAL AND QUALITATIVE FRAMEWORK

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**Abstract:** *This conceptual paper proposes a qualitative framework to understand the role of social support in the role transition of single mothers. Grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's theory of coping and integrated with Social Support Theory, the framework examines how emotional, informational, and instrumental support systems shape single mothers' coping experiences during their transition to sole parenthood. The objective is to explore how personal, cultural, and societal factors interact with support mechanisms in influencing psychological well-being. By offering a narrative and theoretical synthesis rather than empirical testing, this paper presents a culturally informed perspective that reflects the unique socio-emotional realities of Malaysian single mothers, including those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Key challenges such as financial insecurity, social stigma, and lack of institutional support highlighted as critical areas where social support plays a mediating role. This framework emphasizes the contextual nature of coping and suggests that future research would benefit from qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to capture rich, lived experiences. Ultimately, the paper aims to guide research and practice toward developing more inclusive, context-sensitive interventions and policies tailored to the specific needs of single mothers in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *Role transition, social support, coping mechanisms, single mothers, psychological well-being*

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## Introduction

The transition to single motherhood is often accompanied by profound psychological, social, and economic challenges (Chasson & Taubman–Ben-Ari, 2021). In this paper, the term single mother refers to women who are solely responsible for raising their children due to various circumstances such as divorce, legal separation, widowhood, or having never been married. This definition acknowledges both the temporary and permanent nature of single motherhood and includes those who may not be legally divorced but are de facto single parents. By adopting an inclusive and context-sensitive definition, this study ensures clarity regarding the population it addresses and reflects the diverse realities of single motherhood in Malaysia.

In the Malaysian context, single motherhood carries distinct cultural and social implications, often shaped by societal stigma, religious expectations, and familial pressures. These cultural factors influence how single mothers experience their transition and access available support. Recognising these nuances is essential to provide a culturally informed analysis of their challenges and lived experiences.

Malaysia has seen a rise in divorce rates and evolving family dynamics, which have contributed to increased visibility, and often vulnerability, of single mothers. Their lived experiences underscore the need to understand the role of coping mechanisms and, more specifically, the function of social support systems (McFadden et al., 2021). While numerous studies have explored coping strategies, relatively few have examined how context-specific support systems shape the coping experiences and role transitions of single mothers (Alsamiri et al., 2024). This paper aims to conceptualise the role of social support through a qualitative lens, offering a theoretical framework grounded in lived realities and cultural sensitivity.

## Literature Review

The transition to single motherhood is a complex process influenced by psychological, emotional, and social factors (Girme et al., 2023). To understand how single mothers in Malaysia navigate this life shift, it is essential to review the literature on coping mechanisms, the influence of social support, and the relevance of qualitative approaches in capturing lived experiences (Jaffer et al., 2023). This review draws from foundational theories and recent empirical findings to build a conceptual understanding of how support systems and coping strategies intersect during role transition (Reinholz et al., 2021). It further emphasises the importance of analysing these elements within specific cultural and contextual frameworks to produce meaningful and applicable insights.

### Coping Mechanisms and Role Transition

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage specific external or internal stressors perceived as taxing or exceeding their resources. Coping is thus a dynamic and evolving process shaped by both time and context. In the context of role transition, particularly among women, coping involves complex adjustments to shifts in personal identity, daily responsibilities, social roles, and emotional well-being (Branje & Morris, 2021).

For single mothers, this transition represents more than a structural change in family dynamics, it is multifaceted psychological and emotional transformation. It entails a redefinition of the self, renegotiation of roles in both private and public domains, and the dual responsibilities of caregiver and provided. D'Amore et al. (2023) argue that such transitions demand substantial psychological adaptation and resilience, as single mothers often navigate unfamiliar legal

systems, altered social identities, and new expectations without the traditional support of a partner.

These transitions are frequently compounded by experiences of social stigma, isolation, financial instability, and emotional fatigue (Arena et al., 2022). Such challenges can diminish self-esteem and compromise psychological well-being, especially in the absence of adequate coping resources. Coping strategies, therefore, must not only be individualized but also deeply influenced by socio-cultural and economic contexts (Jogulu & Franken, 2023).

Given this complexity, existing frameworks must move beyond surface-level behavioural strategies to examine the broader contextual influences shaping how single mothers respond to adversity. This highlights the need for a nuanced, culturally grounded framework that reflects the lived realities of single mothers in Malaysia, one that considers personal agency, social expectations, and the availability of our support systems to fully understand the coping process during role transition.

### **Social Support Systems**

Social support is widely recognised as a key factor in promoting psychological well-being and mitigating stress, particularly during major life transitions such as single motherhood. It typically includes three primary types: emotional, informational, and instrumental (Jones et al., 2022). Emotional support comprises empathy, love, trust, and care. Informational support involves tangible aid such as financial assistance, childcare, transportation, and household help (Robertson et al., 2024).

According to Jones et al. (2022), social support acts as a buffer against stress, enabling individuals to perceive stressors as less threatening and improving their ability to cope. This buffering hypothesis underlines the importance of strong, supportive networks in navigating life challenges effectively.

However, the type, availability, and effectiveness of social support can vary greatly depending on several contextual factors, including socio-economic status, cultural norms, and personal networks. In many cases, individuals from lower-income or marginalized backgrounds may face limitations in accessing consistent and effective support systems. This is particularly relevant for single mothers, who often experience disruptions in their traditional support structures following marital breakdowns or bereavement (Arena et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, family units, community networks, and religious institutions often serve as critical sources of support. For many single mothers, these structures provide emotional and practical help during transitional periods. In the Malaysian context, family, community, and religious institutions traditionally play a central role in providing support. For some single mothers, these networks offer a vital source of emotional comfort and practical assistance. Community leaders, extended family members, and faith-based groups can become pillars of support during the role transition period. However, this support is not universal. In other instances, cultural stigma, shame, or deeply rooted gender expectations may deter single mothers from seeking help or lead to judgmental attitudes that undermine their psychological safety (Jaffer et al., 2023).

Additionally, the informal nature of many support systems in Malaysia means that access often depends on personal relationships, which may be inconsistent or conditional. As such, while social support has the potential to significantly enhance coping capacity, its uneven distribution

and culturally mediated dynamics call for a more contextualised understanding. Recognising these complexities is essential in developing responsive interventions and policies that can bridge the gap between support availability and actual needs among single mothers (Kenny et al., 2023).

### **Qualitative Perspectives in Coping Research**

Coping research has traditionally been dominated by quantitative methods, which are valuable for identifying statistical patterns and general trends. However, these methods often fall short in capturing the depth, complexity, and contextual realities of individual experiences, especially in sensitive and multifaceted life transitions such as single motherhood. In contrast, qualitative approaches offer a richer, more nuanced lens through which to examine how single mothers navigate their roles and develop coping mechanisms.

Quantitative approaches tend to rely on pre-defined categories, standardized questionnaires, and theoretical assumptions that may not fully reflect the lived experiences of single mothers. These instruments can impose preconceived frameworks that overlook context-specific realities, particularly in non-Western societies like Malaysia. As a result, important emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions of coping may go unmeasured or misunderstood, furthermore, by reducing experiences to numerical data, quantitative methods risk minimizing the voices and agency of single mothers, thereby failing to capture their unique perspectives and adaptive strategies.

In contrast, qualitative research prioritizes the voices of participants and allows for an in-depth exploration of their coping journeys. As Usman et al. (2024) argue, methodologies such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology are particularly valuable for uncovering the underlying meanings, emotions, and contextual factors embedded in the coping process, elements that are often missed in structured surveys or assessments. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, researchers can engage with the lived realities of single mothers, enabling a more authentic and grounded understanding of their experiences.

Qualitative approaches are especially well-suited for studying coping among single mothers in Malaysia, where cultural norms, religious beliefs, family dynamics, and social expectations significantly influence coping behaviours. By situating these experiences within their socio-cultural and economic contexts, qualitative research offers a more comprehensive and culturally relevant framework for understanding how single mothers adapt to their changing roles.

Moreover, qualitative research empowers participants by providing them with a platform to share their stories in their own words. This emphasis on narrative agency not only fosters greater empathy and insight but also affirms the participants' sense of control and dignity. As Lim (2024) notes, qualitative methods are powerful tools for constructing theories that are grounded in reality, rather than imposed from abstract or universalist models.

Importantly, qualitative research facilitates the discovery of emergent themes, coping strategies, and support needs that may not be captured by existing theoretical models. By doing so, it enriches the existing literature and informs the development of more holistic, context-sensitive, and effective interventions for supporting single mothers.

In summary, the qualitative approach adopted in this study is not only methodologically appropriate but also ethically and culturally essential. It allows for a deeper, more empathetic

engagement with the complex realities of single motherhood, offering insights that can lead to more responsive policies, programs, and support systems tailored to the needs of this population.

### **Conceptual Perspective and Theoretical Foundation**

This paper is grounded in a conceptual perspective that integrates key psychological and sociological theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the coping mechanisms among single mothers undergoing role transition. At the heart of this perspective lies the belief that human experiences—particularly those involving identity shifts—are both individually navigated and socially constructed.

The foundational theory used in this conceptualization is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This model explains how individuals cognitively appraise and manage stressful events through coping mechanisms. Within the context of single motherhood, this perspective views stress not just as a reaction to external events, but as a dynamic process involving interpretation, resources, and strategic responses.

Complementing this psychological lens is the Social Constructionist view by Berger and Luckmann (1966), which suggests that identities and roles are continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. From this conceptual viewpoint, the role transition from wife/mother to single mother is not just a personal change but a process influenced by social perceptions, cultural narratives, and institutional contexts.

Furthermore, the Social Support Theory by Thoits (1995) is essential in this conceptual landscape, emphasizing the role of emotional, informational, and practical support in mitigating the impact of stress. This perspective highlights the importance of both formal (institutional) and informal (family and peer) support in shaping how single mothers adapt and cope.

Finally, the framework incorporates Selye's (1951) theory of stressors, which acknowledges the physiological and psychological triggers that challenge an individual's equilibrium. These stressors—financial, emotional, social—are central to the coping process and provide context to the mental health challenges experienced by single mothers.

Taken together, this conceptual perspective allows for a holistic and dynamic understanding of how single mothers experience role transition. It integrates internal psychological processes, external stressors, social environments, and support systems into one coherent model, offering a foundation for future empirical inquiry and intervention design.

### **Implications and Contributions**

This conceptual paper contributes meaningfully to the growing discourse on coping and role transition by presenting a culturally grounded framework tailored to the unique experiences of single mothers in Malaysia. By integrating psychological, sociological, and contextual insights, the framework offers a more holistic understanding of how social support influences the coping process during significant life changes. It not only addresses a critical gap in existing literature—particularly the underrepresentation of non-Western perspectives in coping research—but also elevates the voices and lived realities of a marginalized group often overlooked in policy and practice.



Beyond its academic value, the framework lays a strong foundation for future qualitative studies that seek to explore these experiences in greater depth. Researchers can build upon this model to uncover nuanced coping strategies, examine the effectiveness of different support mechanisms, and investigate the evolving nature of single motherhood in Malaysian society.

Moreover, this paper serves as a practical guide for policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community practitioners. It encourages the development of more empathetic, culturally sensitive, and evidence-informed interventions that truly reflect the needs and challenges of single mothers. By fostering a deeper understanding of their emotional, informational, and practical support needs, this work can help shape responsive social policies, community-based programs, and mental health initiatives that promote resilience, empowerment, and long-term well-being.

### Directions for Future Research

While this conceptual paper offers a culturally grounded framework for understanding the coping mechanisms and role transitions of single mothers in Malaysia, it also paves the way for future research aimed at deepening and validating these insights. Several key directions are proposed:

Firstly, empirical validation of the proposed framework is essential. Qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic studies, can be employed to explore the lived realities of single mothers. These approaches will allow researchers to conduct thematic or narrative analysis, identifying patterns, meanings, and adaptive strategies that either support or challenge the conceptual assumptions outlined in this paper. Such methods are particularly valuable in capturing the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of coping, thereby strengthening the theoretical robustness of the framework.

Secondly, future research should examine how variations in social support accessibility and coping strategies manifest across different demographic and geographic contexts within Malaysia. For instance, studies could investigate how ethnicity, religious affiliation, urban versus rural settings, and socio-economic status intersect to shape the coping experiences of single mothers. Understanding these intersectional dynamics would help tailor interventions to specific community needs and highlight structural inequalities that may hinder resilience.

Thirdly, emerging platforms such as social media warrant closer examination. Researchers could explore how online communities, digital support groups, and virtual peer networks influence the coping processes and emotional well-being of single mothers. This line of inquiry could reveal new, technologically mediated forms of social support that complement or compensate for the limitations of traditional networks.

Additionally, the role of formal institutional support should be a focal point in future investigations. Research could evaluate the effectiveness of existing governmental policies, NGO-led programs, and workplace accommodations in supporting single mothers. Particular attention could be paid to how these institutional structures promote or hinder psychological resilience, financial independence, and social integration.

Comparative studies involving single mothers from other Southeast Asian or Islamic-majority countries could also provide meaningful cross-cultural insights. Such comparative research would help identify both shared and culturally specific coping mechanisms, thereby informing

the development of broader, context-sensitive models applicable across similar socio-cultural settings.

Finally, longitudinal studies are encouraged to track the evolution of coping strategies over time. These could investigate how single mothers adapt across different life stages or significant transitions, such as remarriage, career changes, or children reaching adulthood. Longitudinal insights would offer a dynamic understanding of resilience and adaptation, highlighting how coping is not static but evolves with shifting circumstances and support systems.

In conclusion, future research should prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration and include diverse voices, especially those of single mothers themselves, to ensure that academic, policy, and community-level interventions are not only evidence-based but also empathetically grounded in lived experience.

### Conclusion

Understanding the coping experiences of single mothers through the lens of social support offers valuable insights that can inform both academic research and practical interventions. This conceptual framework underscores the critical role of emotional, informational, and instrumental support in shaping the psychological, social, and functional trajectory of single mothers during role transition. These support systems not only buffer stress but also empower women to redefine their identities, manage responsibilities, and navigate the socio-cultural challenges associated with single parenthood. As such, this framework highlights the importance of viewing coping as a dynamic and context-dependent process, influenced by both internal resilience and external resources.

Future research should employ in-depth qualitative methods—such as narrative inquiry, phenomenological studies, and case analyses—to validate, contextualize, and enrich this framework. Such approaches will capture the lived realities of single mothers more holistically, allowing researchers to identify nuanced patterns and emergent coping strategies. Ultimately, the findings can guide the development of more empathetic, culturally responsive, and evidence-based support mechanisms and policy interventions tailored to the diverse needs of single mothers in Malaysia.

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