Social Constrains Facing Female-Headed Parent Families Based on Social Constructivist Feminism

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Abstract

In Saudi Arabia, the number of female-headed families has increased dramatically during the past four decades, and the likelihood of a woman becoming a female-headed parent is unquestionably affected by cultural and social influences. This qualitative study aimed to identify the social constraints faced by female-headed parents from the point of view of social constructivist feminism, as well as the techniques by which they were able to adapt to these constraints. This study was conducted in Saudi Arabia with 14 participants. It used semi-structured interviews, and two research questions guided the study: (1) What are the most important social constraints encountered by female single parents? (2) How do female-headed parents overcome these social constraints? By adopting social constructivist feminist theory, the study identified two main social constraints that affect female-headed parents in Saudi Arabia; namely, gender stereotypes and the patriarchal system. In addition, it revealed common strategies used by female-headed parentism adapting to these constraints, such as thinking positively, enhancing their self-confidence, and advocating female single-parent autonomy. Based on these results, the researcher makes a number of recommendations.

Keywords: Female-headed parents, Social constraints, Social Constructivist Feminism, Gender Stereotypes, Case Study, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The family is the nucleus of society and its main component. Its existence is necessary for the survival of the human race and its continuing existence ensures the permanence and continuity of society. Societies consist of families, and the stability or disruption of any society depends on the state of those families. Islam has established the rules and principles necessary for families to provide their children with a healthy social upbringing, and the Holy Quran indicates the best methods by which Muslim families can deal with their children and provide them with an integrated and balanced education. The Quran states: "There has come to you from Allah a light and clear Book …wherewith Allah guide the all who seek His good pleasure in peace and safety”[1]. In today’s society, there are many different types of families, including intact, dispersed, single-headed, and stepfamilies. In all these different forms of families, a single incident may cause the family structure to change. One of the most striking changes in family structure over the last twenty years has been the increase in single-parent families. Various family members contribute to this phenomenon and the burden is distributed among the different parties. Success and balance depend on the sharing of responsibilities, and both the father and mother play a role in rearing their children. The effective rearing of children in society results in children becoming positive and healthy individuals. However, when one of the parents abdicates his or her role in the child-rearing process, this leads to deficiency or inadequacy in the socialization of children, as in the case of female headed parents in Arab communities when the mother is forced to bear the full responsibility for her family.

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This happens due to either the death of her husband, when child rearing becomes the widowed mother’s sole responsibility, or the spouses’ separation, when the divorced mother takes over child rearing, or abandonment by the husband, when the mother finds herself managing the child-rearing process singlehandedly. Being a female single parent—whether through widowhood, divorce, or abandonment—imposes constraints and burdens, forcing the female-headed parent to accept increased responsibility and play multiple roles. Owing to the difficulties of life, the need for continuous daily effort, and the psychological nature of women, female-headed parents are subjected to increasing pressure [2]. Inevitably, divorce, widowhood, or abandonment affect all the concerned parties, but especially women, who have the greatest impact on the support and raising of children [3]. Therefore, the constraints and pressures facing a female single parent increase when she suddenly finds herself bearing burdens that were previously shared with the father and tries to fill the gap caused by his absence. This causes many problems for the mother and her children, as many studies have shown that fatherless children suffer from multiple social and psychological problems [4]. When this happens, it becomes the role of the female single parent to compensate for the father’s absence and supply the lack. She continues raising, supporting, and nurturing her children, meeting their needs and requirements and protecting them in a society that regards female-headed parents as incomplete and inferior; hence, she faces social stigmatization, which imposes an extra burden affecting, in one way or another, the raising of her children [5]. Unfortunately, this attitude persists in society even though Islamic law and theology acknowledge the merit of a mother raising her children alone, and the latter enhances her status by giving her a higher rank in Janab (Heaven). Islamic history mentions a number of female-headed parents who raised male children alone and accords them great status for raising children in the face of extreme difficulties; for example, the mothers of Imam Shafi'i, Imam al-Bukhari, and Anas bin Malik [6].

Researchers who have studied single parenthood have approached the topic from various professional perspectives [7]. For instance, sociologists emphasize the social factors that contribute to variations in family forms and, to explain increases in the number of single-parent families, they give specific attention to racial, ethnic, and social class differences, as well as to changes in norms and values regarding family formation. Economists describe single parenthood in terms of its costs for the individuals involved and for society in general, highlighting the significance of human capital in sustaining a society. Family scientists emphasize reciprocal influences between family characteristics and family structure, focusing their attention on the links between parenting skill, maternal adjustment, and child learning in female single-parent families. They also examine the impact of the surrounding environment on family functioning and child outcomes. Psychologists focus on the influence of mothers’ personality traits and the psychological functioning of children, focusing on their adjustment and learning, and highlighting intrapersonal and intra-psychic processes. In interdisciplinary approaches, these factors are often considered simultaneously. Perhaps the most productive approach, therefore, is to review, synthesize, and integrate research from various disciplines to derive a common heuristic model that explains why and how particular female-headed parents are able to manage effectively in challenging environments.

1.1 Purposes and Research Questions of the Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to shed light on a specific category of society; namely, female-headed parents (divorced, widowed, or abandoned) and the social challenges facing them. This study addresses, in depth, aspects of these challenges in the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in general and the area of Tabuk in particular. Such a study enriches other studies that address the social constraints encountered by female single parents, based on social constructivist feminism [8]. The current study aimed to identify the social constraints facing female-headed parents by answering the following questions:

1. What are the most important social constraints encountered by female single parents?
2. How do female single parent overcome these social constraints?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Status of Female-Headed parents in Saudi Arabia

Female-headed parents (divorced, widowed, or abandoned) are a common phenomenon in all societies and this phenomenon appears to be spreading [4]. Several studies in the Arab countries and Saudi Arabia in particular, have addressed the various constraints that affect the life of the female single parent, such as economic, psychological, cultural, and other challenges. Those challenges vary according to her living conditions, the society in which she lives, and the attitudes of society regarding her position—all of which make her life more difficult.
Despite the large number of studies relating to the problems of widows, divorcees, and abandoned women, most of these studies were concerned with discussing constraints in general, such as Kazem’s study [9], while others examined only economic or psychological constraints, such as Khuwait’s study [10]. Despite all the attempts to investigate the constraints that female-headed parents face in Arab societies, there is no study which has yet examined deeply the social constraints in Saudi Arabia by using a qualitative approach according social constructivist feminism. Therefore, the current study aimed to highlight the social constraints facing female-headed parents who are raising children, since these constraints have a great impact on children’s development [11].

2.2 Social Constructivist Feminism

The guiding conceptual framework of this study was based on social constructivism, which focuses on the experiences and views of participants in a social context [12]. Social constructivists believe that individuals’ understanding of reality is constructively built through their experiences and subject to various interpretations by those individuals; hence, different individuals will interpret a particular phenomenon differently. According to social constructivist feminism theory, men and women are assigned different gender roles and expectations in society, which force them to act differently in various social situations and when interacting with different groups of people. Smith et al. [13] stated that “communal characteristics (e.g., sympathy, gentleness, submissiveness) are more associated with women than men, whereas agentic characteristics (e.g., assertiveness, dominance, aggression) are assumed to be more aligned with men than with women” (p. 1159). Thus, men and women behave according to the expectations of society, with women traditionally being viewed as gentle and calm, and men as more powerful, aggressive, and strict. Even though changes in society have affected gender roles and social expectations, women are still considered to be communal, sociable, and interdependent, while men are agentic, independent, and masterful. In fact, gender roles may differ greatly depending on the social structure; so, for example, men can be influential and assertive at work, while being subject to their wives at home. Women can also be subordinate to male managers in the workplace, but make important decisions and control everything in the family circle. People’s gender does not matter greatly in certain social structures, since gender expectations depend mostly on people’s choice, values, and traditions. Some families are male-dominated, while others are controlled and managed by women. Women now feel more liberated and are striving for greater equality with men in various fields. The worldwide feminist movement inspired greater confidence and security in women, enabling them to gain more rights and opportunities and affecting their communication styles, influence, and other factors. Men and women have different styles of communication: “women are, overall, more expressive, tentative, and polite in conversation, while men are more assertive and power-hungry” (14, p. 17). People’s attitudes towards others in society also differ greatly in both genders, since women care more about others. Also, women try to help people empathetically, while men are more independent and strive for achievements rather than moral aims. Merchant claimed that “men view conversations as a way to establish and maintain status and dominance in relationships, women see the purpose of conversation to create and foster an intimate bond with the other party by talking about topical problems and issues they are communally facing” (15, p. 17). Thus, communication may be organized differently by representatives of both genders when people follow different aims and discuss personal issues.

Gender and status affect people’s influencing behaviors and tactics in various settings. Eagly stated that “if social change proceeds to the point that men and women become equally represented at all levels, those aspects of sex differences and status inequalities would disappear from people’s behavior, stereotypes and expectancies” [15, p. 980]. People should be evaluated and characterized by their knowledge, skills, and attitudes, rather than their gender differences, racial backgrounds, and other characteristics that create greater inequalities and discrimination in various fields. If both men and women have equal opportunities in the social sphere, there will be fewer conflicts and concerns, because both will be treated equally and obtain similar rewards and benefits. Gender differences are mostly based on expectations formed decades ago, and the world has changed greatly since they were formulated. Rajan & Krishnan stated that “position seems to be central to the authoritarian personality, and it would, therefore, determine largely the individual’s interactions with the world, including perhaps the way influence is exercised” [16, p. 199]. Thus, even though gender differences may affect influencing tactics and the use of power in the workplace, people’s position still matters and greatly predetermines people’s attitudes towards subordinates and the strategies and tactics used to perform their jobs. Gender differences affect, not only communication styles, but also leadership roles, influence, and the power tactics used by men and women in various settings. Even though social expectations still matter and impact people’s choices and behaviors, people should try to maintain their values and life principles, rather than adopting the roles imposed on them by their communities.
2.3 Related Work

Six feminist studies that identified the power elements and difficulties confronting female single guardians are included here. Those studies have been inspirational for me as I have conducted my study. Usakli’s study compared the behavioral tendencies, such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and submissiveness, of single parent children and two parent children [17]. 75 single parent children and two parent children participated in the study. The Children’s Action Tendency Scale (CATS) [18], which was translated into Turkish by Usakli, was used as the instrument. At the end of the study, it was found that the single parent children were less assertive, and more aggressive and submissive, than their two-parent peers. School administrators, teachers, and families should be aware of the behavioral tendencies of children. It is recommended that future studies should consider intervention programs for single parent children to overcome their aggressiveness and submissiveness. Shubbol and Ayman’s study aimed to describe the social and cultural transformations that led to the phenomenon of divorce and analyzed their role in increasing the rate of single parenthood in the town of Tora [19]. To achieve this goal, the researchers conducted a field study by using the observation method and conducting lengthy and in-depth interviews with the parties in the divorce relationship and their families. The results revealed a set of social and cultural criteria followed by the society, in terms of its relationships and connections, which caused destabilization of the emotional relationship between spouses due to internal and external factors, such as some of local traditions and society values. In addition, the study also revealed a strong relationship between the culture of the society and its values and beliefs on the one hand, and increasing divorce rate on the other hand.

Nelson’s study uncovered and described the barriers that low-income, female-headed parents between the ages of 17–24 experienced and the strategies they adopted in their efforts to persist through three years of college [20]. This study examined traditional age, first generation, low-income female-headed parents’ persistence in college from entry to third year at a four-year public institution. In addition, the study examined multiple barriers and strategies concerning student’s employment and residential status, the relationships of students with their parents, and academic and college preparedness. The qualitative inquiry method used in this study allowed for an examination of low-income first generation students and their persistence from year to year. Narrative analysis was utilized in this study to assist the researcher in writing a detailed report of the phenomena of single parents’ persistence towards college completion and to investigate and determine the barriers and support systems identified by the single-parent students. The researcher collected stories of the struggles and strategies of the study participants during individual interviews, which were later woven together in the coding and discussion of the study. The purpose of Gutierrez’s [21] qualitative examination was to study how Asian and Asian North American women managed race and sexual orientation in a male-centric context of Christian philosophical training utilizing Cervero and Wilson's [22, 23] system. The sample population consisted of eight Asian or Asian North American female philosophical teachers in religious establishments. The results demonstrated that the participants experienced power elements according to four themes: dominance, voice, expert knowledge, and positionality. Three principle conclusions were drawn. First, Asian and Asian North American female philosophical teachers are overlooked and silenced in the constructivist literature regarding religious instruction. Second, the positionality of these women impacted the power relationships in their home environments and interacted with a variety of systems. Third, prejudice and sexism influenced the teachers in the institutional context of philosophical education.

Vidyasagar and Rea’s [24] study, “Saudi women doctors: Gender and careers within Wahhabi Islam and a ‘westernized’ work culture”, was published in 2004. This study examined the experiences of 28 female doctors working in Saudi Arabia and described the problems they encountered that were peculiar to Saudi society: a constitution and legal system that sanctioned male superiority and segregation of the sexes in all areas of life. The study also discussed how they dealt with these problems and how the context affected their choice of specialty, their work alongside male colleagues, and their promotion prospects. Despite the constraints, the older women doctors had achieved professional success and satisfaction, and the younger doctors also expected professional success. Johnson-Bailey & Cervero’s[25] study was entitled “Power dynamics in teaching and learning practices: an examination of two adult education classrooms”. The purpose of this study was to define how the power relations that exist in the wider social context are played out in the teaching and learning dynamics of adult education classrooms. The study used a qualitative comparative case study of two courses which were taught by the researchers at the University of Georgia. The data sources included students’ evaluations, teachers’ observations, interviews with students, interviews with both teachers, and conversations with similarly-situated faculty members. The authors used four previously researched themes—mastery, voice, authority, and positionality—to organize the results.
The results showed the many complex ways in which power relations played out across all these four themes and how these dynamics directly influenced the teaching and learning process. The positionality of the instructors and learners appeared to be the main power relationship organizing classroom dynamics.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Population and Sample

Maxwell defined the community fora similar study as "all the elements of the phenomenon to be studied, or all or what the results of the research can be circulated, whether these elements are individuals, books, educational activities, buildings, etc." [26, p.102]. The community for the current study consisted of female-headed parents (divorced, widowed, or abandoned) in the Tabuk area of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2019. The researcher selected a case study approach that followed Miles and Huberman’s sampling guidelines [27]. The goal was to study female-headed parents who could provide rich and relevant data regarding their experiences of social constraints. To achieve this goal, during sample selection, the researcher took into account the mothers’ availability based on both the researcher's and participants’ access to the research venue, ethical considerations, and resources (i.e., funds). The researcher considered it important to select participants and settings that could provide the information needed to answer research questions [28]; thus, additional participants were selected based on their status as mothers, including widows, divorced, and abandoned mothers. Maxwell defined the sample as "the group chosen by the researcher from the members of the community, the researcher must determine the sample size, type, and justification of its choice" [29, p.102]. In qualitative research, the researcher does not seek to make the sample statistically representative, as is the case for quantitative research. Instead, according to the purpose and the context of the study, the researcher chooses qualitative research, to ensure that sufficient information is available to reach a deeper understanding of the studied community, because the point is not to produce results for circulation, but to understand the studied phenomenon in depth [30]. This study was based on a sample consisting of 14 female-headed parents. The sample group comprised four divorced women, five widowed women, and five abandoned women and formed a rich sample for the qualitative research in the area where the study was located. Jaradat confirmed that rich sampling is a type of sampling that is used in the qualitative approach, because the cases addressed are informative and the studied phenomena clearly show [31, p. 21]; therefore, the researcher selected this sampling method to acquire adequate and varied information.

Table 1: Description of the Participants

| Name of Participant (Pseudonym) | Status       | Age at Marriage | Period of Marriage (years) | Work         | Salary         | Number of Children | Property Status |
|---------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Umm Omer                        | Divorced     | 15              | 17                         | Not working  | 5300 SR ($1400) | 3                  | Owner           |
| Umm Haiyat                      | Abandoned    | 33              | 2                          | Teacher      | 11800 SR ($3,146)| 2                  | Tenant          |
| Umm Fahad                       | Widowed      | 13              | 30                         | Not working  | 2600 SR ($693)  | 6                  | Owner           |
| Umm Waseem                      | Widowed      | 15              | 10                         | Not working  | 6400 SR ($1700) | 5                  | Owner           |
| Umm Essa                        | Divorced     | 17              | 12                         | Not working  | 3500 SR ($933)  | 2                  | Tenant          |
| Umm Saud                        | Abandoned    | 21              | 9                          | Not working  | 1800 SR ($480)  | 1                  | Owner           |
| Umm Khalid                      | Abandoned    | 19              | 11                         | Not working  | 4000 SR ($1,066)| 3                  | Tenant          |
| Umm Omran                       | Divorced     | 29              | 5                          | Teacher      | 15400 SR ($4,106)| 2                  | Owner           |
| Umm Mas’ad                      | Divorced     | 15              | 8                          | Not working  | 24000 SR ($640) | 3                  | Tenant          |
| Umm Issa                        | Widowed      | 22              | 19                         | Not working  | 5300 SR ($1,413)| 4                  | Owner           |
| Umm Adel                        | Widowed      | 16              | 25                         | Not working  | 7000 SR ($1,866)| 4                  | Owner           |
| Umm Khuloud                     | Widowed      | 15              | 18                         | Not working  | 6400 SR ($1,700)| 5                  | Owner           |
| Umm Saad                        | Abandoned    | 14              | 6                          | Not working  | 28000 SR ($760) | 1                  | Tenant          |
| Umm Ahmed                       | Abandoned    | 17              | 4                          | Not working  | 40000 SR ($1,066)| 3                  | Tenant          |
3.2 Data Collection

In qualitative research, several methods of data collection can be adopted in case studies, depending on how the researcher believes the reality can best be uncovered. As Yin indicated, a major strength of case study research is that researchers have the opportunity to employ multiple sources of evidence to allow the inclusion of a broader array of historical and behavioral issues [32]. It is vital to collect data using a variety of sources, because each data collection approach has flaws and, when used alone, may not provide sufficient information to obtain the full perspective. According to Yin, a case study may involve one or more of the following approaches to data collection: interviews, observations, questionnaires, documents, field notes, and audiovisual materials [33]. Bogdan and Biklen specified the use of interview transcripts, field-notes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memos, and other official records [34]. More broadly, Merriam confirmed that a case study should not be limited to any single method of data collection [35]. Instead of generating a controlled environment, as experimental researchers would do, case study researchers investigate events that occur in natural settings; therefore, it is important to consider this when selecting the data collection methods. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted and the interview protocols helped to direct the dialogue between female-headed parents in order to understand their experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

The study found that the main social constraints encountered by female-headed parents were as described in the following sections.

4.1 Gender Status Beliefs

Some of the theories that explain gender roles, such as the theory of functional structure, assert that gender roles are often assigned according to traditional views of the roles of men and women, and this gender assignment starts in early childhood. The female child is prepared to be a wife and mother, confined within the boundaries of the house, while the male child is considered to be a future man who will look after and support his family, resulting in gender balance (Parson and Bales, 1955).

4.2 The Patriarchal System

The position of a female-headed parent in society forces her, without male support for her child rearing, to redouble her efforts to carry out multiple roles. According to the theory of social roles, this is known as “doubling the role” and the female-headed parent tries to fulfill the expectations of both masculine and feminine roles. Such behavior is unacceptable to the society in which she lives, which in turn leads family members and neighbors to resist and condemn such behaviors; therefore, she becomes subject to a greater authority—community authority. Such resistance is exerted in the form of social pressure for the female-headed parent to conform, which limits her role and imposes a framework that subordinates and marginalizes her. Society plays a significant role in the life of a female-headed parent, because its acceptance of her social status and its support would give her the power to recover and contribute [36]. Female-headed parents can attempt to overcome these constraints and fulfill their roles in the form required, using several methods that emerged through the analysis of the data and which all the participants agreed were important, as outlined in the following sections.

4.2.1 Positive thinking based on self-constructivism and personal skills constructivism.

There is no doubt that humans are always in need of the support of Allah the Almighty. Allah is the first and ideal authority because the main troubles of life can be referred to Him: “Why should we not put our trust in Allah” (Surah Ibrahim).

Consequently, female-headed parents, despite the forlorn lives they lead and the burdens they carry, and notwithstanding the absence of family and social support, can formulate plans of action with the help of Allah the Almighty. They can place their trust in Allah, express their grievances, and quietly petition Him, leading to strength and tolerance. This is the support that Umm Saud referred to when asked what gave her courage to face the constraints: “Tolerance is the way to happiness. She persists in talking to her youngsters and other individuals, puts her trust in Allah, and relies on Allah and tolerance to support her”. Umm Khalid concurred with her: she gave counsel to female-headed parents, saying: “Be tolerant! Be tolerant! Be strong! Since mothers are worn out by their children, and some of the fathers have died, by the will of Allah, how can they bring up their youngsters? She should be strong, not weak, and not have to answer to anybody. The best thing I did in my life, and did not lament, was when I took responsibility.
I feel strong, therefore, and I have high confidence.” She affirmed that faith, and a constructive approach towards the future, are important: "You ought to consistently act naturally, consistently be cheerful, consistently be happy, and consistently show individuals that you needn't pay attention to anybody. You ought not to burden your youngsters with your issues and environment. You can whine about your worries to your companions.”

The holding of a job increases a female-headed parent’s confidence, and its impact on the individual is to give her satisfaction, demonstrate her proficiency, and provide genuine incentives, notwithstanding abnormal circumstances; hence, the individual acquires a better self-image, and a more positive and progressive outlook, because of successes at work. This was confirmed by the study of Huddy & Terkildsen, who asserted that a woman’s job drives her to experience two emotions, the first of which is confidence, due to an increase of accomplishment and self-esteem [36]. The woman increases such regard through the organization’s acknowledgement of the experience she has acquired, which in turn expands her confidence and self-esteem. The second emotion is self-assurance; a profound inclination that emerges within her and enables her to confront the difficult issues in her life. The presence of such certainty, and its development, depends on accomplishing the social objectives that she formulates and pursues, which she accomplishes through assertiveness, persistence, and dedication.

4.2.2 Enhancing self-confidence.

The female-headed parents found ways to strengthen their confidence and overcome the constraints that they faced in their child rearing. This included enhancing their children’s self-confidence and trust in their mothers. Al-Ahmadi defined self-confidence as “a set of beliefs or ideas by which human make its view” [37, p.36]. In this study, the participants mentioned several ways in which they enhanced their self-confidence, such as expressing their opinions, making their own decisions, participating in family events, being self-reliant in their study and life affairs, and exercising freedom of choice. Umm Omran stated: “A female single parent should not wait for support from anyone; she should support herself, and not let anyone interfere with her child-rearing. Second, she should not pay attention to anything said about her children. If she gets news about her child, she should sit with him and question him...” Umm Mas’ad said that it is important to promote the children’s self-confidence: "A female single parent should support and validate her children. The child does not forget your validation. You should not try to destroy him. You should try to be his friend. I strengthen and reward them. I am patient, so I explain their mistakes to them...The most important thing is you, your health, your style, your elegance, your strength, and your confidence as a single parent." She talked about the strength of the children’s confidence in their mother and the importance of her opinions to them. The participants in this study led by example in strengthening the confidence of their children, by being friendly with them, not appearing weak, not giving great weight to other people's opinions, and showing their self-confidence to their children, as explained previously.

The theory of social roles considers the ways by which people learn roles (called targeted learning). It aims to formulate social roles deliberately so that individuals learn the patterns of behavior associated with the roles that the community expects them to apply in the future, by interacting with those around them and getting used to these behavioral patterns. Such behavioral patterns become the social role, whether in the family, at school, or in the community. Umm Issa consciously taught her children to deal with their social status and tried to accustom them to relying on themselves in the absence of their father by enhancing their self-confidence and their confidence in her. She said: "The absence of their father is very difficult; for example, when we go out and I sit alone with him, they see a father with his children and what he buys for them, so I get them used to buying things for themselves, since they all have their own money, and I take no part...." Alanzi’s study confirmed the importance of building and enhancing self-confidence at the mid-level of orphan populations and the importance of supporting them socially [38].

4.2.3 Supporting female single parent autonomy

Female-headed parents suffer harsh conditions and the burden of the many responsibilities and duties they have to assume. They often need to identify the right person to help them and share their burdens, even if this support is only a consultation with a member of their family or their children. In this study, despite the participants’ self-reliance, constructivism, and confidence, they sometimes needed help, so they tried to choose a person with the ability and the desire to stand by them; some of them chose a father or brother, and some without relatives might choose neighbors and friends. Umm Adel stressed the need to choose the right person to help her, even though she did not want to depend on anyone. She said: "I do not rely on anyone but myself. I fight with myself, but when I need to, I resort to my brother Muslin, because there is a moment when you need someone.
Then, he solves the problem, takes note of it, and knows how to behave, so sometimes I tell him to resolve the problem and sometimes I say to myself 'No, wait, study the problem and then decide'."

Umm Omar chose her younger brother to stand by her, rather than her older brother (Ibrahim), because she misses him and because Muslim is the closest to her sons: they love him and accept his advice and guidance. Moreover, Umm Waseem stated: "I resort to my brother, the youngest one, because he is the closest to me, and his age is near my age. He treats my children as if they are his friends, because their elder uncle is strict, but the younger treats them as friends and they accept him and love him more." The choice of a female single parent of a particular person may depend on the issue; Umm Waseem, for example, despite her dependence on her brother, said that she might approach her father: "I depend on my brother, but for things greater than this, my father may need to intervene, may Allah grant him long life". While Umm Khuloud claimed that it was difficult for her to turn to a relative for help because she was a female single parent (abandoned), which forced her to hide her social status from her relatives. She wished that her family were more understanding of her situation and confirmed she would certainly turn to them without hesitation if they were; however, she preferred to resort to acquaintances, such as neighbors, workers, and friends, depending on the issue and her need, because of her relatives’ lack of support.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it appears that there are two types of constraints: one relating to gender, and the other relating to society. The first challenge is gender stereotyping. This study highlighted gender roles as a challenge for female-headed parents in raising their children. All participants in this study were living in a society that is characterized by rigid gender stereotyping, so that male domination prevails, leading to the restriction of the female role in general; in other words, it privileges the role of the father, rather than the mother, especially in raising children. It is clear that such domination restricts female-headed parents in some aspects of raising a child, and this was reflected in the speech of some participants concerning the problems they faced, such as male domination of fathers or brothers over them and their children. It was noticeable that all the participants in the study refused to show weakness in the face of male domination, despite there being a clear contradiction between this refusal and their ways of raising their eldest sons. Although the mothers resisted this domination, as Umm-Omar asserted: "The hardest period I faced was the teenage period of my son (Omar); since he has grown up, he interferes and snoops about many things. I feel that he makes me doubt myself". At the same time, she wanted to raise him appropriately as the eldest son and grant him the authority to supersede his father in taking responsibility. As she said: “I deal with my son Omar like he is a mature person, because I will need him in the future”. This shows that the mother perpetuated male domination in her son, because of the absence of the father in her environment and her desire to free herself of this conflict [39]. It seems that gender discrimination was one of the cultural attitudes that were inherited by different generations in the participants’ environment, because they all grew up in an environment prevailed over by men; therefore, they were driven to perpetuate male domination despite their resistance. This participant ultimately wanted to be subject to her son’s male domination and she was preparing him for it. Many studies have shown that gender discrimination is a challenge for female-headed parents in raising their children, such as Weldegabreal’s research [40], which studied single parents in Ethiopia. Another study, by Sultana, showed the impact of gender discrimination on children’s education in Bangladesh, and 340 female participants indicated their desire to support the father’s male domination. With regard to the second challenge—social challenge—it appeared that all participants acknowledged the impact of social domination due to their different social status. Concerning the interventions of others in their lives and their ways of raising their children, this marginalization was because these women were standing alone, without a man’s help in raising their children.

It is noticeable that this challenge (community power) is closely linked to the first challenge (gender discrimination): pressure is placed on female-headed parents through social domination and the constraints it imposes, and it seems that there is no way to avoid it except through the perpetuation of gender discrimination and male domination. The participants found that gender discrimination is a means of evading community power: the female single parent, by relying on the eldest son, makes him a legal barrier between her and social intervention. In other words, the female single parent perceives the challenge presented by community power as greater than the male domination that she grew up with and lived under. Due to the social constraints faced by the participants, they all agreed that they used three strategies. Each of them relied on spiritual support, as the first and most important method, over any other method, for alleviating the challenges they faced. By the grace of Allah the Almighty, patience and satisfaction, as well as personality building, could be achieved, so that the women could be resilient for themselves
and their children. They were able to remain self-confident and strong by using the second strategy available to them, which was to strengthen their self-confidence and their children’s confidence in them; however, they could not avoid having to ask for help, so the third strategy, for all the participants, without exception, was to ask someone for help in raising their children. There have been many previous studies regarding female-headed parents in different cultures and societies that showed the social constraints faced by female-headed parents in developing countries, such as the studies of Sultana in Bangladesh [41], Kazem in Iraq [42], Weldegabreal in Ethiopia [43], Kutwal in Kashmir [44], Zulu in Zambia [45]. These studies have identified more severe constraints than those faced by female-headed parents in developed countries, such as those researched by Gonzalez in Germany [46], and Utrata in Russia [47]. Consequently, the methods used by female-headed parents in developing countries, including the participants in the current study, are weaker than those used by female-headed parents in developed countries. This is apparently due to relative lack of social support, since the single parents’ actions in the developed societies did not differ from the expectations of their respective society. Regarding differences in the composition of the societies in which the participants lived, the current study was conducted in a conservative and gender-biased society; therefore, given less gender discrimination and social domination, Saudi Arabian female-headed parents might come up with stronger methods of resistance. Based on the results of the current study, it is clear that the participants agreed on the similarity of the constraints they encountered and the methods they used to overcome them.

6. Recommendations

From the findings presented in this study, the following recommendations were formulated: Educate the community about the importance of understanding the social situation of female-headed parents and provide the social support that they need and expect from family and community members.

1. Educate community members, especially males, about the importance of the social role played by female-headed parents in raising families, in order to alleviate the prevalent suspicion and stigmatization of female-headed parents.
2. Establish centers for female single parents, to examine and study the common problems they face, find solutions, and enable the female-headed parents to share experiences and exchange coping strategies.
3. Provide various and purposeful programs for female single parents, including religious and educational programs, to raise their awareness about the importance of their role in society and their role in raising children, as well as recreational programs to alleviate burdens and pressure.
4. Produce an ID card for female-headed parents (a female single parent card) to facilitate and expedite the female-headed parents and their children without them being forced to approach males for assistance.
5. Urge schools to pay more attention to the children of female-headed parents and try to hold private sessions with student guidance counselors in schools to discuss the female-headed parents’ problems and help them to find solutions; thus, schools could support female-headed parents in raising their children.
6. Establish special institutions to support single parents in defending their rights and solving their problems.
7. Establish units in courts to provide family counseling for female-headed parents when they are divorced, widowed, or abandoned; guide female-headed parents on their legal rights; and formulate laws and regulations that oblige both parents to contribute to raising their children and to fulfill their responsibilities.

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