

# The Problem of Female Single Parenthood in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Between Unavoidable Consequences and Different Relational Networks of Solidarity

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**How to cite this paper:** Médard, K. M., Nsengiyumva, A., & Odon, K. M. (2023). The Problem of Female Single Parenthood in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Between Unavoidable Consequences and Different Relational Networks of Solidarity. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 190-208.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.115014>

**Received:** January 7, 2023

**Accepted:** May 21, 2023

**Published:** May 24, 2023

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## Abstract

The daily predispositions that are cracked for women in single parenthood are variable geometry. After the rupture of the conjugality or the death of the spouse, the abandonment or the absence of a partner, they begin a long stage of single parenthood. This is what creates the matrimonial solitude often punctuated by violence, contempt, revolt in the eyes of the entourage, but also marked by different kinds of solidarity. This study analyzes the problems encountered in the state of female single parenthood and distributes the families according to the criterion of the help of extended families and relational networks.

## Keywords

Single Parenthood, Solidarity, Violence, Solitude, Dependence

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to examine and analyze the problems of single female parenthood and to describe the different relational networks of solidarity that intervene in the lives of single-parent families. This contribution answers the question of the doctoral research we are conducting at the University of Burundi. This study is in line with the socio-anthropology of the family and, as far as possible, the socio-anthropology of the family finds meaning in the composition of the family and its organization. It is in this logic that one en-

counters various forms of family according to the cultural context. They can be nuclear, reconstituted, single-parent, etc. Thus, the single-parent family form refers to this study that we are conducting. However, the study is descriptive in that it identifies the profile and socio-economic characteristics of women heads of household. It is also analytical in order to present the way in which these households function in this study area.

This study focuses on rural and urban households in South Kivu province in the Bushi region. Bushi is located in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kivu region), in South Kivu province. It includes the city of Bukavu, the territory of Kabare and Walungu. Thus, the best geographical reference point for the Bushi is the city of Bukavu (Bashi, 2005: p. 13).

This choice of study is justified by the fact that in South Kivu province, women head 30% of single-parent households (Adhama Mirindi et al., 2014). It is noted that in the event of death, abandonment, separation or divorce, the father tends to entrust his children to family members: sisters, mother, grand brothers, etc. and gets back together more than the mother (Déchaux & Le Pape, 2021). In such a situation, the woman displays an opposite attitude by keeping her children regardless of the circumstances in which she finds herself. A saying of the Bashi tribe underlines this very well “omukazi afa oku bana bage” meaning “A woman dies with and for her children”. This maxim translates the importance of the identity of the woman to the Bushi as a social enzyme. It is thus observed that nothing can be the object of the social distancing of a mother from her children and therefore parenthood takes precedence over conjugality. For this reason, the question of the psychological well-being of the child and the conditions of its good development arise in the absence of one of the parents (Noë & Cyr, 2012).

While Africa is overshadowed by the domination of the traditional representation of the “large family” and by social codes, one might expect traditional practices of extended solidarity in household organization (Adjamagbo, 1997). However, the model of traditional structures marked by strong family ties is undergoing significant changes, including a significant increase in the nuclearization of households (Séchet et al., 2003). However, we note that the survival of single-parent families headed by women is often not dependent on various family ties but on the strategies adopted by the woman and, more importantly, on her relational resources.

Tichit (2005: p. 1), notes that: “single parenthood is a topical issue in Africa where most families live in a difficult context due to political, health and economic instability”. Studies on the situation of single female parenthood in Africa are not sufficiently developed. It is from this angle, the author notes (Idem, p. 5), that in:

“The whole specificity, female family organization is largely underestimated by research that in fact goes so far as to deny when they reduce the rates of female heads of household to a statistical illusion due to polygamy.”

First, approaching such research in this sense, women have difficulty articulating their status as single female heads of household. Second, the fact that these women maintain the relationships and mechanisms to organize themselves alone without a husband does not allow for any benefit of the aforementioned status: head of household. It is here that we can speak of the matricentric family according to the words of [Dery \(1993\)](#) who defines it as a family composed of a mother with her child (ren). It is defined by the absence of the father and the children are in daily contact only with the mother. It is in this sense that [Wagner \(2011\)](#) analyzes situations of single parenthood with the frequency of poverty situations. For him, this social space of vulnerability is located at the intersection between three dimensions with their factors: family (insufficient coverage of the cost of children, family allowances, tax deductions, community facilities), insufficient professional income, deficiencies in the assessment and payment of maintenance claims by children.

However, as Jean-François [Le Goff \(2005\)](#) points out, in a couple or a family, it is possible that one member at a given moment is more parentified than the others insofar as the child can benefit from affection and support when the need arises. The author speaks of parentification as an expression of the process of solidarity between the members of a couple or a family when the suffering of one activates the faculties of solidarity and solicitude. Without doubt, as [Leray and Séchet \(2013\)](#) consider, the vulnerability of single mothers has three dimensions: the family dimension with the constraint of the use of time in the face of the activities and tasks of daily life for oneself and for the children. The economic dimension with the labor market in a consideration of low wages. And, finally, the territorial dimension with two levels. The one of living spaces (employment and housing) which is a differentiation between single-parent families. And the other is that of the spaces of single women with children in their movements between home, workplace and shopping.

On balance, parental absence continues to promote imbalance in family life. To this end, [Saint-Jacques \(2004a\)](#) mentions an inherent fact of the single-parent family in [Amato and Keith's \(1991\)](#) statement that the disruptive effect of living in a single-parent family is partially reduced when the non-custodial parent maintains close relationships with his or her children. Therefore, children with a dead parent will have the same adjustment problems as those with divorced parents.

As can be seen with [Unterreiner \(2018\)](#), parental separation is an event in the life course that leaves important consequences in the daily lives of families. To this end, the following questions serve as the compass for this research: What are the different problems that women living in single parenthood face? How are the different forms of social intervention for single-parent women's families? In order to answer these questions, this study takes into account the background elements, which are developed in three points. These are: female single parenthood with some reference to its basis, the problems faced by female-headed single-parent households, and single-parent households in relation to solidarity and the

different networks of social ecosystems.

## 2. Methodology

The study covers three settings: urban (Bukavu), rural (Kaziba) and semi-rural (Mudaka), with a sample of fifteen women in the study area, five from each setting. The survey was conducted in 2021-2022. The survey period covered two main activities: contact with the community and identification of key persons for the determination of the work; the actual interviews at the household level conducted on the one hand by some people who know the community and on the other hand by ourselves in the community that we know better.

This study proceeded with biographical interviews with the women heads of household. We used a semi-structured interview and developed an interview guide that we used in the interviews with the respondents. This interview guide was addressed to women heads of household and single parents aged 28 and over in all the households in the sample, i.e. five individuals (women) for each entity in this study. It provides information on their profile and the socio-economic characteristics of the household (their life trajectory, their marital status, their organization in their daily life and their relations with extended families and various acquaintances). It provides information on the composition of the household, the mode of acquisition of the dwelling, the income, the average available consumption per day, among other things. The content of the data did not allow us to measure the time spent on domestic tasks and activities. But we know for all the people who make up the household and who participate daily in the various domestic tasks.

In this presentation, one will notice, on the one hand, the diversity of the answers and the preferred motives of the configuration on the organization of the female single-parent household. That is to say a reminder in coherence with the different forms of single parenthood, and on the other hand, the indication that the interlocutor, and not the researcher “knows”, in order to indicate to him that he has a great margin of freedom in his remarks. In particular, a series of questions on the organization of the household and the activities carried out or not carried out by the women heads of household, on the responsibility for certain household tasks and on the image that the entourage and society has of the woman in a single-parent situation completed the interview guide. These fifteen interviews were systematically transcribed for analysis.

First, we presented a descriptive analysis of the sociological profile of single-parent households and the mode of organization of single-parent families according to different socio-economic characteristics. We chose to focus on two elements that make sociological sense in the single-parent household: the composition of the household on the one hand and its organization on the other. The female head of the household and the dependents constitute the set of household members. A certain number of modalities that make it possible to identify the household determines them: age, marital status and its duration, the woman's

level of education and her age, the number of children in the household and their schooling status. The other modality concerns the types of activities of women heads of household as civil servants, traders and farmers in the three settings (Bukavu, Mudaka and Kaziba). These modalities are not without some influence on income for the organization of the household. Thus, salaried women stand out more positively in the organization of the household than those who are traders, farmers, assisted women and those who depend on the system of rebates from the various associations and cooperatives. Hence, the income variable is dependent on the types of activities that these women carry out; sources of production that justify the family organization.

In the second stage, we carry out a comprehensive analysis of female single-parent households and seek to interpret the imaginary world of these households by identifying the different forms of female single parenthood, the reasons for this marital status, including the various dimensions of the difficulties experienced by women heads of household. This variable of forms of single parenthood has modalities such as passive women, dependent mothers who live with their children, women who entrust their children to family members and those who are active (independent).

The other variable was mobilized in our model: the social ties variable, which makes it possible to account for the organization of the single-parent household and constitutes the last analysis. Through this variable, we seek to verify the types of solidarity involved in these households. The hypothesis confirmed by the results shows that the various forms of help from friends and support from collegial relationships are significant compared to those from family members. However, fifteen interviews were systematically transcribed and analyzed. And for reasons of anonymity, we opted to give fictitious names to the interviewees. Each interview lasted 45 minutes.

### **3. On Female Lone Parenthood: Some Points of Reference on Its Basis**

As Jean-François Le Goff's (2005: p. 289) comments on single-parenthood emphasise, states that it was the sociologist Andrée Michel, in 1975, who introduced the expression "monoparentalité" into France. This term was modelled on the American expression "single-parent family" in order to designate, without stigmatising, an irregular family model, which was considered to be more negative than the reconstituted family. Daughter mothers were then renamed "single mothers". To this fact, other names were added to join a cohort of irregular situations caused by the absence of two parents in a family group. These include divorced women, separated women, unremarried widows and all sorts of single mothers with sole custody of children. This is when the single-parent family was born, with the life of a parent and a child under the age of twenty-five being mentioned. What characterises these families is the absence of the parent couple on a daily basis. In this case, geographical single parenthood is excluded in the

consideration of hardened single parenthood.

It is in this same vein that authors such as [Noë and Cyr \(2012\)](#) forcefully point out the concrete definition of single parenthood as the presence of only one parent on a daily basis and therefore the absence of the other. This leads these authors to conclude that the absence of the father causes effects on the child that are more related to the consequences of the separation as it is the case in the drastic decrease of income, on the emotional health of the mother and on the form of depressive feelings. Without question, [Mucchielli \(2001: p. 211\)](#) agrees with the extent of single parenthood in the West to mark a disrupted dimension concerning divorces. He notes that the contemporary family marks profound transformations of family or conjugal forms such as single-parent families (with children of known or unknown fathers). Thus, the authors insist above all on the increase in the number of divorces and single-parent families, and on questioning the absence of the father.

For this constant, [Mucchielli \(2001: p. 212\)](#) points to sociologists' concerns about the social mutation of families. Sociologists point out that the analyses of the concerns about the nostalgia for the traditional family are well-founded. These analyses refer to the disappearance of a so-called traditional model that has never been the historical foundation that it is believed to be. In the end, the model of the nuclear family based on marriage, the father's work and the mother's education of the children, is a model that has only lived for a few years (roughly the 1950s) as a totally dominant static norm.

[Boudarse and Scelles \(2016: pp. 55-63\)](#) argue that the fragility of fathers in the event of marital breakdown is reflected in the vulnerability of father-child ties, with the main residence going to mothers. These authors believe that professionals and researchers should reflect on the pragmatic question of "the adequate father without more", just as we have been able to think of "the adequate mother without more". Since the current social and institutional situation shows that in the event of separation, when the mother has the main residence, recourse to the father is very often only made when the mother is in great pain.

However, the reality is quite different, and the position of father after separation is often not like that of mother. After a divorce or separation, men get back together more quickly than women and in a greater proportion ([Déchaux, 1998](#)). However, as conjugality is not at all based on the form of marriage, the position of women makes considerable room for parenthood. [Neyrand and Rossi \(2004: p. 128\)](#) report on the lives of women who have experienced a separation. These authors note that women from very working-class social backgrounds who separate from their spouses illustrate very well the discrepancy between norms and the facts, since most of them find themselves alone to bring up their children in a situation of job insecurity, after a separation often experienced as a violent break-up.

Even though [Mucchielli's \(2001\)](#) analyses note the absence of longitudinal studies to fully test the hypothesis that there are few empirical studies that highlight the impact of fatherlessness on the cognitive and emotional development of

the child, catastrophic consequences are still observed for the child as well as for the single custodial mother. The context of this study in South Kivu, DRC, demonstrates more in the analysis and description of female lone parenthood. However, despite this unpleasantness of family mutation towards single parenthood, we can retain from Mucchielli's (2001: p. 224) definition that "the family is above all a relational system, a system for organising relationships, exchanges and communication within a community of life.

In South Kivu, the situation of single-parenthood among women poses serious problems for its recognition. While in many nuclear families one observes households whose composition is punctuated by single-parent families caused by the phenomena of early marriage, women abandoned by their husbands, the phenomenon does not worry anyone and it is thought that everything must be resolved by silence. This complicity is played out in the role of the customs in place and the powerlessness of the State for social control as is the case in the West. Hence, the inability to know the exact number of single-parent families in each living environment of the people in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Africa, and in particular in the Democratic Republic of Congo, marriage is a luxury as a sign of identity that can be enjoyed daily in society. In contrast, celibacy is a lesser status for young adults. This is why the majority of young people indulge in marriage or romantic adventures without measuring the consequences that the traditional family structure holds. Very empty, there are early and violent divorces, separations and occasional abandonments. This creates considerable forms of single-parent families. This study will describe certain facts experienced by women heads of household in order to understand the extent of the phenomenon.

## **4. Problem Patterns in Female Single-Parent Households**

### **4.1. Violence in Single Parenthood**

In terms of violence, threats to land and material goods are common. In the urban environment, women are victims of threats and violations of the boundaries of the land they occupy. Being alone, without a husband and with minor children, they are unable to easily defend their property. In rural areas, the case of widows remains a major problem with the property that their husbands have left behind, notably fields to cultivate, plots of land to build houses, livestock and agricultural products.

These forms of threats are mentioned below in the life stories of these women: Judith (41 years old), lives in the city of Bukavu, in a neighborhood of the commune of Ibanda with nine children in her care. Her husband left for the mining areas barely six years ago and never returned to his family. This woman tries to live at the rhythm of the day's rate. Being the only head of the household, she is under pressure from neighbors who want to take away a few meters of the plot of land left to her by her husband. She often finds it difficult to defend herself because there is no one to help her. And even if she wanted to go to court, the

costs of legal proceedings are very high. But in the end, she ended up giving up a few feet in order to find social peace. She relates her experience:

One day, I had problems with a neighbor who wanted to take away a small portion of our plot between him and me. Because, as my husband is not here and it has been a long time since my husband left and he doesn't see him here in Bukavu, he wanted to take advantage of my single-parent situation to take a portion of land from me. And, as I didn't have the money to go to court, I was obliged to give up a few meters of my plot in order to find peace. It hurts, but I had no choice because I don't have a husband.

Nabintu (57), a widow, lives in rural Kaziba with her children and grandsons. She lives on the produce she harvests from the fields her husband left her. She often lives under the threat of her entourage because they see that she is alone and she has no spouse to assist her in case of need. She explains:

[...] Some people go after you with problems because they know you don't have anyone to step in. Sometimes you would get into this field of trees. Someone comes in and cuts down trees and does whatever he wants, because he knows there is no one to intervene on your behalf. They say sometimes her husband is no more, she is a widow, she has no husband, who can defend her cause. That was the problem..., um... (A little moment of silence, she sighs), to stay a widow, dad, it's hard, it's hard. (A little moment of silence, she resumes: Um, because God, he's the one who allows all this.

The case of Cirezi (56 years old) is almost similar to that of Nabintu. She is also a widow and lives with two children in Kaziba. She is a victim of threats from people around her who want to cut down her trees and damage her fields with their herds of cows. Also, the members of her in-laws are jealous of her building a new house, so much so that they have threatened the masons who were building the house. Sometimes widows suffer injustice that no one can imagine. But these women do not always let themselves be abused. Such is the case of Cirezi's reaction:

[...] So I would say to them, Why can't I build? Leave me alone because first, this is my home, second, I am building at home, third, I am building where my husband left me with our children. Now, what is the problem?

However, in the exchanges, the reply of his brothers-in-law is not without a strong neglect and doubt about the realization of this work. Cirezi relates:

[...] And they make negative criticisms saying that where does this woman find money to build when she has no husband?

These threats and multiform violence do not allow these women to have a space and an intimate life. Women in a situation of separation or divorce and, in particular, widows are the most stigmatized. In the urban environment, the woman who lives with a single parent is often looked down upon. She is less es-



teemed than a married woman, even if she has an unhappy marital life.

#### 4.2. Contempt and Revolt in Single Parenthood

The image of the single woman after separation from her husband raises doubts about her life in the household and above all, she is accused of all the evils that people attribute to her. These women are not well understood and welcomed in society, as if they were condemned to live the ordeal and the whims of their husbands.

The words of Emilienne (50 years old) best illustrate the contempt that single mothers endure in the city. After eight years of separation from her husband, Emilienne lives with her children in one of Bukavu's communes. She spares herself any contact with men and accepts to face the difficulties of life through work in a State Establishment where she earns a salary. She relates:

As for the entourage, I know that to see a woman alone manage the household here in town and be head of the family, you are sometimes labeled a prostitute. For me, I don't care because I can be embarrassed once I do it. But I don't care, so I let people say what they want and then I'm not in their head to know much about what they think of me.

In the rural environment, contempt is even accompanied by physical and verbal violence. It seems strange to see some men with violent character, attacking widows without scruples and cold eyes. The case of Cirezi is more telling in such circumstances. A widow, she lives on a hill in the village of Katunga in the Kaziba chiefdom. She recounts what happened to her:

By the way, I met a man along the way, two years ago. I was coming back from the place where I was dropping off the empty bottles of alcoholic beverages. This man was behind me, and he slapped me on the buttocks "paf" twice in a row. I was surprised and upset, I exclaimed, "Yesu" (Jesus). And he said to me: "Crazy, you poor bitch, can a woman like you stay without a husband? (She burst out laughing). The man continued: "So you and your husband had decided before his death that you would not let another man into your house? And I asked her: "Is it only because of this that you are giving me two successive blows on the way and in the open as if I owed you a credit or stole something from you?"

Faced with the contempt that the women living in the single parenthood know, some of them adopt an attitude of revolt that, later, is transformed by the intimate consolation in a clear decision. This is an exceptional case, as the words of one respondent show. Irene (42 years old) experienced a brutal separation with her husband. Her testimony is eloquent on this subject:

I can tell you that in the first year and second year of our separation from my ex-husband, I was more concerned with what others would say about me. After researching and reading on websites and wanting to dig deeper, I

found women who had it worse than me. And then, after a while, I'm wary of the way others look at me, because if I stick to their argument, I won't be able to move forward. For me, it feels like a kind of rebellion and revolt. And, there was a time when I had to leave my life in someone's hands. But, along the way, it's all over, I can't give priority to someone to run my life anymore. So, I took my life in my hands. I am very proud of that and I don't regret my decision.

### **4.3. Dependence, Loneliness in the Position of Women Heads of Household**

#### **4.3.1. Consequence of Single Parenthood**

Kaufmann (2015: pp. 187-188) nuances at a broader level the different kinds of dependencies of women in single parenthood. It is about three dependencies that these women face in their daily life: The financial dependency that affects the woman insofar as she is too exclusively in the family without a job or with a small job. This family choice costs her a lot of money in case of a breakup. But, what is more surprising is when the woman is too attached to a close, closed and family-dominated group of relations. This way of positioning herself prevents her from renewing her network and from shutting herself off in solitude. Hence the relational dependence. The identity dependence affects the woman in the single parent situation. This can be seen when this woman expects everything from her partner and sinks into depression. When a woman from a modest background accumulates all the dependencies, she sinks into poverty after the disunion. This is not the case for most women once they initiate the marital breakdown. It is freedom that is the feeling, not loneliness. The situation of Emilienne (50 years old) illustrates the meaning of freedom after her marital separation. She recognizes that she can live without a husband. She relates:

[...] For me, I can say that one can live without a husband. My experience is proof of that. I was responsible for everything: the food, the care and the education of the children. This new life allows me to be calm compared to the time when I was with my husband because I could go crazy. In fact, despite the difficulties of life, I feel good in this state.

The words of Irene (42 years old) are interesting to qualify her addiction. It is about building a new life and realizing her old dreams after the marital separation. She understood that the time spent in her household was only a total dependence on her husband. This status she has today is only a sequence of life that does not push her to cross her arms, but to go forward while dedicating herself to the education and the instruction of her children. She clarifies her position in these terms:

[...] Well, especially since I have a few prerequisites, I tell myself it's still worth it. I have to fulfill my childhood dreams. I said to myself once in my life as a couple, I can't stay a tenant, I can't not discover other horizons, it was in my dreams, I can't measure the degree of my life compared to my

family, to my life. There are so many factors that make it possible for me to keep this status, although ambiguous. But when the time comes that I have already decided in my head, I will fix, eh (concentration of the hands), the main objective in relation to all that... which says main objective, it means to divorce and to have a friend not to say to marry again that left me after-effects as well as traumatisms. It's going to take time for it to heal. But for the moment, I dedicate myself to the essential, among other things, the education and the instruction of my children.

#### **4.3.2. Loneliness in Single Motherhood**

In the settings of our study, situations of loneliness vary according to the context of the current status of women heads of household. For example, for women who have been abandoned by their husbands, the living environment contributes to psychological loneliness in housing. The urban environment has its realities for housing. Some women are struck by a loneliness that makes it difficult for them to find a place to live. They are often under-housed in a small room in which they are obliged to stay with the children in spite of them, while the space is not suitable. This one-room accommodation with the name "sleeping area" is not conducive to harmonious living. The living conditions are not convenient: sometimes it is not possible to distinguish between the dining room, the storage room, the kitchen and the place to sleep. The same is true for housing in the rural environment. Some women who have returned to their families of origin or who have been sub-housed in the homes of family members have difficulty finding even one room to confine themselves with their children. On the other hand, those who have experienced the death of their husbands have a better chance of escaping the psychological solitude of housing. They benefit from the usufructs left by their deceased spouses. Also, those who have experienced separation and who have studied use their professional status to cope with this situation. They occupy housing which they rent and which allows them to manage themselves.

Starting from the context of generalized economic crisis in the region, the ruptures and dysfunctions of the integration structures of women heads of household cause solitude. At the level of the family structure, these dysfunctions are manifested by a conflict between parents and children and end up having reason for the cohesion of the group by rejecting outside certain members who have become unbearable. This causes a psychological crisis in the woman and an attitude of rejection and contestation of her own situation, to the point of leading her to opt for a more autonomous, even individual life. This is especially true in urban areas where the deteriorating socio-economic situation forces some women to live in isolation in their families of origin with a higher number of children. The conflict is more marked when the needs of the children become more and more numerous. The parents of the woman abandoned by her husband, not being able to cover the totality of the burden, sometimes give in, rightly or wrongly, to the distancing with this new family under her care. In this case, the woman

assumes an unprecedented solitude as if the condition in which she finds herself depended on her will.

Some widows decide, not without regret, to remarry, especially when their children are grown up: they are torn between the decision to remarry and the decision to take care only of their children. In the end, in most cases, it is the first decision that passes. But this does not mean that this choice is made with much ease. The words of Nabintu (50 years old) indicate the difficulties women have in remarrying.

[...] If I wanted to get married, I would have to get married long ago. But for this moment, no. I have already made the children grow up. What else can I look for? And no man can support me with this load, nobody. There you will hear, it brings me many loads. And for the time being I will remain like this. I can want to live with a husband, but for fear of what is happening today with the diseases that are currently and that we hear that the mother of so-and-so because she passes by here and there, and they say that she was contaminated by this or that, it is a great shame. It's better to protect yourself. Yes, there are moments when the body grows, but what should we do?

For Cirezi (56), living with a husband after the death of her first spouse is a serious problem. It's true that the sexual urge comes once you're still a young married woman. But that doesn't mean that the body can drive you like the wind. In such circumstances, "it is appropriate to trust in God," she says. She specifies in these terms:

[...] Ah, (smiling a little), no, the woman can live her way. It is when you have remained a young married woman that you will feel sometimes that the body does not hold. But there are times when you pray to God and say, "God, you see that I have remained alone, spare me from the desires of the world because I have remained a widow. It is sure that the body cannot accept on its own so that you cannot feel the sexual need, but you just have to contain yourself."

What is important to remember about these women is the context of their lives. These two women all live in a rural environment. This environment is very restricted to the point where exposing oneself to an adventure of marriage or cohabitation can alert the curiosity of everyone in the environment. Because everybody knows almost everybody.

However, it appears from the modes of breakups observed in this study through the life stories of women heads of household that the breakups resulting from the breakdown of conjugal unions predispose these women more to solitude and dependence. David Olivier and Raymonde (David & Séchet, 2004) point out that being a single parent entails constraints and additional costs that only a privileged minority of single mothers (those who are managers) can easily cope with. It is from this perspective that these authors believe that this state of single parenthood, whether temporary or not, is still accompanied by poverty and impo-

verishment. Thus, space contributes to the vulnerability of single-parent families.

## **5. Single-Parent Households Facing Solidarity and the Different Networks in the Existing Social Ecosystems**

### **5.1. Consideration of Extended Families in Single-Parent Households**

As [Unterreiner \(2018\)](#) sees, the family organization arrangements after couple separation are dependent on the entourage of isolated as well as close individuals. This makes the triad of father-mother-child and in-laws may not be enough to cover the mutual aid support within these families. Thus, [Martin \(1997\)](#) takes into account the “network capital” within the families of divorced or separated spouses. He points out that the conditions in which divorced parents live reflect relational vulnerability. It is at this level that the consideration of family solidarity within single-parent households should be appreciated. As pointed out by [A. Unterreiner \(2018: p. 10\)](#), the geographical context influences the degree of mutual aid within families. The researcher examines solidarity within two types of family-entertainment suggested by [\(Bonvalet, 2003\)](#): “dispersed family-entertainment” and “local family-entertainment”. In these types of family, the geographical logic cannot be underestimated. Thus, referring to the case of migration, the author considers that geographical distance does not necessarily mean a loosening of ties; despite the distance, some families continue to preserve related relationships. In the relational wake concerning single-parent families, this study indicates the occasions that present the context and degree of solidarity found in single-parent households.

### **5.2. The Degree of Involvement of Solidarity and Relational Networks in Single-Parent Households**

As [Bonvalet \(2003\)](#) points out, single-parent families are more intensely involved in the family support system only because the overwhelming majority of them have a woman as a reference person. It is in this logic that we can find the idea according to which the immediate family circle is often qualified as cooperative and supportive. It is active in providing material, moral and psychological support to members in case of need.

Based on the statements of the respondents in this study, it can be seen that the degree of solidarity within the household is supported by the geographical context and also by family ties. The involvement of family members with the various helpers in single-parent households is justified by the status held by the women heads of household and their status as occupants of the household. In this logic, divorced and separated women have less help from family members than widows and deserted women, because for widows, the death of the spouse strengthens family ties more. Also, homeowners have more local kin than renters.

In any case, the networks of personal relations (former colleagues, friends of friends, relatives of friends, various acquaintances) have participated and con-

tinue to contribute to the organization of the female single-parent household with different aids. But, their participation depends on the means and location of the single-parent households.

### 5.2.1. The Location of Single-Parent Households in Relation to the Surrounding Area

**Table 1** describes the way in which female single-parent households are set up in relation to the entourage and according to the living environment. Two situations determine the way in which solidarity can be appreciated. These are households that are far from the entourage and households that are close to the entourage. A close relative is understood here as a person with whom one can share the little one has, with whom one can communicate, feel affinity and whose family ties are close. Thus, it is observed that one household out of five in the urban environment is in the dispersed kinship. The reason for this is that the head of the household has separated from her spouse and the possibility of finding employment has forced her to move away from family members and acquaintances she had already maintained during her marriage. As a result, she finds herself in a dispersed environment or entourage, with the result that social ties are weakened. In semi-rural and rural areas, five out of five households are in the location of a local family-entourage. This means that family ties are strong for some households, as testified by some female heads of household. For other households, however, family ties are moderate (occasional and circumstantial) or non-existent.

### 5.2.2. The Location of Single-Parent Households in Relation to the Surrounding Area

The description of the forms of female single-parent households allows us to analyze the situation of the fifteen households with a view to the different family ties involved. It is with this in mind that **Table 2** describes the different forms of single-parenthood for women, according to their living environment. Thus, in urban areas, one woman in five is passive. But in semi-rural and rural areas, the results show that two out of five households are passive. In urban areas, two women entrust their children and only one woman stays with her parents. In semi-rural and rural areas, one woman out of five stays with her parents. In any case, the reality is that in the end, mothers who stay in shelters entrust their children to other members of the family. In rural areas, one out of five women staying at a shelter and one out of five passive women entrust their children to family members. The same is true for working women.

**Table 1.** Family directory around single-parent female households.

Type of family	Urban setting (Bukavu)	Semi-rural setting (Mudaka)	Rural area (Kaziba)
Scattered family-entourage	1	-	-
Local family-entourage	4	5	5

However, it is observed that in urban areas three out of five women are active and in semi-rural areas one out of five is passive. This description shows how women have two situations of single parenthood according to their living conditions. It is at this level that it is appropriate to divide the families by household type, taking into account the criterion of the source of the aid.

### 5.2.3. Distribution of Families by Type According to the Number of Single-Parent Households

**Table 3** describes the forms of contributions that are given to single-parent households. These are support from extended families and support from relational networks. In urban and semi-rural areas, two out of five women living in passive single-parenthood receive support from extended families, compared to three women in rural areas.

Two respondents, Nicole and Marie, living in passive single-parenthood in urban areas provide interesting information about living with their parents. Nicole is divorced and living with her parents and two children. She does not have a

**Table 2.** Forms of single female parenting in the living environment.

Form of single female parenting	Urban setting (Bukavu)	Semi-rural setting (Mudaka)	Rural area (Kaziba)
Passive (a)	1	2	2
Housed mothers (b)	1, 1(a)*	1	1(c)*
Mothers who entrust their children (c)	1(d)*	-	1(b), 1(a)*
Active (d)	3	2	2
<b>Total</b>	5	5	5

\*It is observed that the woman has two forms of single parenthood. Thus, we defined their situation for some of them by coupling the variables (a, b, c, d) next to each modality.

**Table 3.** Consideration of helpers in female lone-parent families.

With help from extended family members			
Form of single female parenting	Urban setting (Bukavu)	Semi-rural setting (Mudaka)	Rural area (Kaziba)
Passive	2	2	3
Housed mothers	1	2	3
Mothers who entrust their children	-	1	3
Active-	2	2	2
With help of relationship networks			
Passive	-	-	-
Housed mothers	2	-	-
Mothers who entrust their children	1	-	-
Active	2	1	2

job, but beyond being under-housed, she receives assistance such as food, child-care and some survival needs:

Since I moved back to my parents' house, I don't mind. I get everything and almost everything. I should be concerned about my children's lives, but dad buys everything for my two children, my mom takes care of my children in everything. What I used to do for my children was to take them to school and back home. But, since dad has a lot of money, my children are transported in a school bus that he has subscribed to.

On the other hand, Marie (38 years old) is in a different situation. Abandoned by her husband, she returned to her parents' home with her own children and the children of her older brother, whom she looked after during her marriage. As a result, she entrusts her children to some of her relatives living in the city. As life is difficult in the city, she decided to work in a restaurant as a plate cleaner. She reassures that it is thanks to her extended family that she lives peacefully.

Passivity is also recorded in the rural environment. Three out of five women are in this state independently of their will. These are the situations of Sandrine, Veronique and Lingoli. Sandrine and Veronique had been abandoned by their spouses. On the other hand, Lingoli has not been in a marital union in her life, she has had children outside of marriage for whom she must take custody. She has difficulty taking care of herself. These women manage to survive on the support they receive from their extended families. Sandrine was forced to return to her parents' home with her children because she could not meet their basic needs. Two of her children have been entrusted to the family members of her first husband: the two little ones, I often leave with their paternal aunt who lives here very close to us. This is also the consideration of the local family-entourage. Apart from the accommodation, she entrusts her children. Contrary to Sandrine, Veronique's situation is very complicated. In her passivity to wait for the eschatological return of her spouse, she finds herself lodged in the household of her son-in-law. As she has many children in her care, she was obliged to entrust her three children to her three daughters who were already married. In the name of intergenerational solidarity, these three daughters were obliged to help their mother. They take care of both their mother and their siblings, without ignoring that they still have their own marital obligations, running all the risks of marital instability in the face of a possible economic conflict that could arise either in case of a serious illness, in case of a disaster related to the COVID-19 pandemic, or in case of an agricultural disaster...

Working women also receive support from extended families. In urban areas, as well as in semi-rural and rural areas, two out of five women confirm having received help from their family members. In addition to the material and financial support that these women receive, they also receive support from family members during times of grief and loneliness. This assistance is greatly appreciated by Irene, who, because of her job as a civil servant, has the means to cover the needs of her children, and who places a lot of importance on this help which brings her family warmth:



In terms of visiting, I can say yes, but not in terms of financial, material support. Well, they are there. They help me when I have a problem with grief, they console me. She also thinks that the assistance of friends and colleagues is important: their financial and material support, especially during times of crisis, allows her to support her family, for which she is responsible. If there are households that benefit from family support, there are others that have no one to rely on. This is the case of Emilienne, a government employee. She reports that it is her colleagues who provide help in managing her household:

There are neither family members nor those of the family of my ex-husband. After my husband's separation, I stayed for ten years with some of his family members, including his biological father and his younger brothers. There were about twenty people in my household. They were colleagues who helped me to find solutions to my problems in the management of my household. Based on the analyses made of the problems faced by single-parent households headed by women and the way in which these households find themselves confronted with solidarity and the various networks of social ecosystems, the ideas remain well-founded to remind us of the phenomenon of single-parenthood among women in South Kivu.

Talking about the problems in single-parent households is tantamount to highlighting the social ills that plague single parents; in particular women who have to chart the fate of children in hostile circumstances such as poverty, discrimination, violence, denial of opportunities and the feeling that women are disintegrating to survive. The organizational arrangements after the separation of the couple (dependency) require a helping hand that from time to time can intervene during the moment of solitude. For this purpose, the intervention of a culture of solidarity is necessary for the balance of single-parent households. This solidarity and relational networks are facilitated by the location or environment in which the female heads of household live. Thus, the environment influences the involvement of stakeholders.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this contribution is to examine the phenomenon of single female parenthood in South Kivu. This examination leads to problems at several levels. From a socio-anthropological point of view, and as [Noreau \(2002\)](#) explains it well, the rupture is the product of the decision of only one of the parents to leave, whatever the circumstances, which justify the departure. At this level, single parenthood is chosen or imposed. Hence, the most well-known image of loneliness after the breakup of a couple is acutely noticed. In the other case, [Saint-Jacques \(2004b\)](#) considers that the separation of parents has consequences for the future of children. It remains a unique experience for children and parents involving stress, pain, disappointments, conflicts, imbalances and reorientation towards new avenues.

It should also be noted that the case of widowhood and the abandonment of the spouse's family unbalances the life of the children. The comments of women

heads of household are often supported by the question of taking care of the children. This refers to the dependence and the recourse to solidarity and relational networks. But, what disturbs is the fact that starting from the entourage and the social environment, the contempt, the violence often set up residence in the daily life of women in single parenthood. Thus, this study serves as an eye-opener for legislators and policy-makers to develop laws and policies to protect single-parent families from the economic and social uncertainties that the absence or lack of basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, education, etc., can cause. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Mother could well be considered and recognized as a national policy emphasizing family solidarity as the primary focus.

This study opens a qualitative approach to situation-problems of dynamics of children of single-parent families in this study area, which until now, is not taken into account by researchers and the Congolese state. In this same concern, the question of the family remains as ideal and still poses serious problems as the question in Hefez (2016), in the *Fabrique de la famille* where we observe a mutation of the family with new links.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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