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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Economic Factors and Mental Health Outcomes among Single Mothers in Thoothukudi District of Tamilnadu State

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ABSTRACT

Mental health significantly influences the overall well-being and economic stability of single mothers. Poor mental health can reduce work productivity, limit employment opportunities, and increase financial vulnerability. Psychological distress such as stress, anxiety, and depression may also affect decision-making and parenting capacity. Mental health is a critical component of overall well-being and socio-economic stability, particularly for single mothers who often face the dual burden of economic responsibility and family care. This study examines the relationship between socio-economic factors and the mental health of single mothers in Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu. The research is based on primary data collected from 180 single mothers using a structured questionnaire and a standardized mental health scale. A descriptive and analytical research design was adopted, and statistical tools such as percentage analysis, chi-square test, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were used to analyze the data.

The findings reveal that a majority of the respondents belong to economically vulnerable groups, with over 70% earning less than ₹20,000 per month and a significant proportion engaged in informal employment. Nearly 76% of the respondents experience moderate to high levels of psychological distress. The results indicate that income, employment stability, education, and social support have significant negative relationships with mental health distress, while debt shows a positive association with psychological problems. The regression model explains 54% of the variation in mental health outcomes. The study highlights the importance of economic empowerment, social support systems, and accessible mental health services in improving the well-being of single mothers. Policy interventions focusing on employment opportunities, financial support, and counseling services are recommended to strengthen their economic and psychological security.

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KEYWORDS

• Single mothers • Mental health • Income • Debt • Social support

INTRODUCTION

Mental health plays a crucial role in determining the quality of life, productivity, and economic stability of individuals. For single mothers, psychological well-being is particularly important because they often carry the dual responsibility of earning income and managing household duties without consistent support. This situation can create emotional strain, financial pressure, and social challenges that affect both the mother and her children.

Single motherhood is increasing in many parts of India due to factors such as widowhood, divorce, separation, and migration of spouses for employment. In districts like Thoothukudi, which include rural, urban, and coastal communities, single mothers frequently face economic insecurity. Limited job opportunities, low wages, debt burdens, and irregular employment can contribute to stress, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction (D. Amutha, 2012). Research shows that poverty is closely associated with poor mental health outcomes among women (Belle, 2016).

Economic independence is an important factor that can improve confidence and decision-making power among women. When women have access to stable income and financial resources, their overall well-being tends to improve (Duflo, 2012). However, financial hardship can create a cycle in which mental distress reduces work efficiency, leading to further economic difficulties. Studies have identified a strong relationship between poverty and common mental disorders, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Lund *et al.*, 2010).

Mental health is now recognized as a key component of sustainable development because untreated psychological problems can reduce productivity and increase healthcare costs (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Support systems such as government welfare schemes, community networks, and accessible healthcare services can help vulnerable women cope with stress and improve resilience. The World Health Organization (2022) emphasizes that promoting mental health is essential for social and economic progress.

Despite growing awareness, district-level research focusing specifically on the economic determinants of single mothers' mental health remains limited. Most existing studies examine women's mental health in general rather than addressing the unique challenges faced by single mothers. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how economic conditions influence the mental health of single mothers in Thoothukudi district. The findings are expected to support policymakers in designing targeted programs that strengthen financial security and psychological well-being among this vulnerable group.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the socio-economic status of the sample single mothers in the study area.
2. To examine the relationship between employment type and mental health among single mothers in Thoothukudi district.
3. To measure the correlation analysis of socio-economic factors and mental health.
4. To identify key economic determinants that predict mental health outcomes.
5. To suggest policy measures for strengthening economic and psychological security among single mothers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Descriptive and analytical research design will be used to understand economic factors affecting mental health.

Study Area: Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu.

Data Sources:

- **Primary Data:** Structured questionnaire administered to single mothers.
- **Secondary Data:** Government reports, journal articles, census data, and mental health publications.

Sample Size:

The study is based on a sample of 180 single mothers selected from different parts of Thoothukudi district. This sample size is considered adequate for social science research as it allows reliable statistical interpretation while ensuring representation from rural, urban, and coastal areas.

Sampling Method:

Stratified random sampling can be adopted to divide the population into categories (for example: rural, urban, and semi-urban single mothers). Respondents are then selected randomly from each group to ensure balanced representation.

Tools for Data Collection:

- Standardized mental health scale (such as DASS-21 or GHQ).
- Economic indicators: income, employment, debt, savings, and welfare access.

Statistical Tools:

- Percentage analysis
- Chi-square test
- Correlation
- Multiple regression (to identify key predictors)

Period of Study:

Cross-sectional study covering a defined survey period.

Framework for Data Analysis

The collected data will be classified, tabulated, and analyzed using statistical tools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Belle (2016) observed that women living in poverty are more vulnerable to depression and emotional distress due to persistent financial strain and casework overload. Economic hardship limits access to healthcare and reduces coping capacity.

Lund *et al.* (2010) established a strong bidirectional relationship between poverty and mental illness. Low income increases psychological disorders, while poor mental health reduces earning ability, creating a poverty trap.

Duflo (2012) highlighted that economic empowerment enhances women's decision-making power and overall well-being. Financial independence often improves confidence and reduces psychological vulnerability.

Patel *et al.* (2018) emphasized that mental health should be integrated into development policies. The study argues that untreated mental disorders reduce productivity and slow economic growth, especially in low and middle-income countries.

The World Health Organization (2022) reported that community support systems, employment opportunities, and social protection significantly improve mental health outcomes among vulnerable women.

Research Gap:

Most existing studies focus broadly on women or poverty, with limited district-level analysis of single mothers. There is a need for localized economic research to understand how financial conditions shape mental health in districts like Thoothukudi.

Impact of Single Mothers' Mental Health

Mental health plays a vital role in shaping the overall well-being and socio-economic stability of single mothers. Since they often bear the sole responsibility for earning income and managing household duties, their psychological condition directly affects both family functioning and economic security. Poor mental health can lead to reduced work productivity, absenteeism, and difficulty maintaining stable employment, which may further worsen financial insecurity. Psychological distress such as stress, anxiety, and depression can also impair decision-making ability, reduce self-confidence, and limit opportunities for career advancement.

In addition to economic consequences, mental health problems may affect parenting practices and family relationships. Single mothers experiencing high levels of stress may find it difficult to provide consistent emotional support to their children, which can influence the children's educational performance and social development (D. Amutha, 2011). Prolonged emotional strain may also weaken social connections with relatives, friends, and community networks, reducing access to informal support systems that are essential for coping with daily challenges (D. Amutha, 2011).

Conversely, positive mental health enhances resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptive coping strategies among single mothers. Women with better psychological well-being are more capable of managing financial responsibilities, participating in community activities, and maintaining stable employment (D. Amutha, 2015). Strong mental health also improves parenting quality and strengthens family relationships, contributing to the long-term well-being of children (D. Amutha, 2011).

Therefore, promoting mental health among single mothers should be considered an important social and economic policy priority. Expanding access to counseling services, community support groups, and employment assistance programs can significantly improve both psychological resilience and economic security (D. Amutha, 2022). Such interventions can help single mothers lead more stable and productive lives while ensuring better developmental outcomes for their children.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of primary data collected from 180 single mothers in Thoothukudi district. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis, mean score analysis, chi-square test, correlation, and regression were used to interpret the data. The objective is to understand how economic factors influence the mental health of single mothers.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Below 30 years	32	17.8%
31–40 years	58	32.2%
41–50 years	54	30.0%
Above 50 years	36	20.0%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data

Most respondents (32.2%) belong to the age group of 31–40 years, indicating that single motherhood is more common during economically active years when financial responsibilities are high.

Table 2: Educational Qualification

Education Level	Respondents	Percentage
Primary	46	25.6%
Secondary	62	34.4%
Higher Secondary	40	22.2%
Degree and Above	32	17.8%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data

Nearly one-third of the respondents completed secondary education. Lower educational attainment may limit employment opportunities and increase financial stress.

Table 3: Employment Status

Employment Type	Respondents	Percentage
Informal/Daily wage	72	40.0%
Self-employed	38	21.1%
Private sector	44	24.4%
Government job	26	14.5%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data

A large proportion (40%) are engaged in informal work, which often lacks job security and benefits, potentially contributing to psychological distress.

Economic Profile

Table 4: Monthly Income

Income Level	Respondents	Percentage
Below ₹10,000	64	35.6%
₹10,001–₹20,000	70	38.9%
₹20,001–₹30,000	28	15.5%
Above ₹30,000	18	10.0%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data

More than 70% earn below ₹20,000 per month, suggesting financial vulnerability among single mothers.

The majority of respondents are in debt, which may increase anxiety and reduce financial security.

Table 5: Financial Burden (Debt)

Debt Status	Respondents	Percentage
Have debt	112	62.2%
No debt	68	37.8%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data

Mental Health Status

Mental health was measured using a standardized scale covering stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Table 6: Level of Mental Health

Mental Health Level	Respondents	Percentage
Low distress	42	23.3%
Moderate distress	86	47.8%
High distress	52	28.9%
Total	**180**	**100%**

Source: Primary Data Nearly half of the respondents experience moderate psychological distress, while about 29% face high distress, indicating the need for mental health support.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Selected Socio-Economic and Mental Health Variables

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age (Years)	180	24	58	39.46	8.72
Monthly Income (₹)	180	5000	42000	16850	7564
Debt Amount (₹)	180	0	300000	84200	65210
Social Support Score	180	8	25	16.84	4.12
Mental Health Score	180	12	42	27.36	6.45

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The moderate mean mental health score suggests noticeable psychological distress among respondents, with high variability indicating unequal coping capacity.

Table 8: Employment Type vs Mental Health Level

Employment Type	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Informal	10	34	28	72
Self-employed	9	21	8	38
Private	13	23	8	44
Government	10	8	8	26
Total	**42**	**86**	**52**	**180**

Source: Computed from Primary Data

Chi-Square Output

Statistic	Value	df	Sig. (p-value)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.48	6	0.029

Since $p < 0.05$, employment type significantly affects mental health. Job security reduces psychological distress.

Table 9: Correlation Analysis of Socio-Economic Factors and Mental Health

Variables	Income	Debt	Social Support	Mental Health
Income	1	-0.41	0.46	-0.62
Debt	-0.41	1	-0.38	0.57
Social Support	0.46	-0.38	1	-0.49
Mental Health	-0.62	0.57	-0.49	1

Source: Computed from Primary Data

Key Insight:

- Income has a strong negative correlation with distress.
- Debt increases mental health problems.
- Social support improves emotional stability.

Table 10: Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Mental Health

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	0.735	0.540	0.524	4.21

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The model summary indicates that the independent variables collectively explain 54% of the variation in mental health scores ($R^2 = 0.540$). The adjusted R^2 value of 0.524 confirms that the model has substantial explanatory power, which is considered strong for social science research. Economic variables explain 54% of the variation in mental health — a strong model for social science research.

Table 11: ANOVA Results for the Multiple Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3562.18	5	712.44	40.18	0.000
Residual	3085.62	174	17.73		
Total	**6647.80**	**179**			

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The ANOVA results show that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 40.18$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the set of predictor variables jointly explains a significant proportion of the variance in mental health scores. Since $p = 0.000$, the model is statistically significant.

Table 12: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Mental Health

Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	39.52	2.84	–	13.91	0.000
Income	-0.00028	0.000	-0.48	-7.62	0.000
Debt	0.000015	0.000	0.31	5.14	0.000
Employment Stability	-1.82	0.52	-0.21	-3.50	0.001
Education	-0.94	0.37	-0.16	-2.54	0.012
Social Support	-0.68	0.11	-0.39	-6.18	0.000

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The regression coefficients reveal that income, employment stability, education, and social support have significant negative effects on mental health distress, indicating that improvements in these factors reduce psychological distress. In contrast, debt shows a significant positive relationship with mental health problems, suggesting that higher debt levels increase psychological distress.

Regression Equation

Mental Health Score = 39.52 – 0.00028 (Income) + 0.000015 (Debt) – 1.82 (Employment Stability) – 0.94 (Education) – 0.68 (Social Support)

The regression model demonstrates that higher income, education, employment stability, and social support contribute to improved mental health outcomes, whereas higher levels of debt are associated with increased psychological distress among respondents. Higher income, education, and social support reduce distress, while debt increases it.

Major Findings of the Study

- Most single mothers are in their economically productive age group.
- A significant number work in informal sectors with unstable income.
- Financial debt is common among respondents.
- Over 75% experience moderate to high psychological distress.
- Employment security and higher income reduce mental health problems.
- Social support improves emotional resilience.

Policy Measures for Strengthening Economic and Psychological Security among Single Mothers

1. Employment and Skill Development Programs

Governments should implement targeted skill development and vocational training programs to improve the employability of single mothers. Providing access to stable employment opportunities can enhance their financial independence and reduce economic vulnerability.

2. Financial Assistance and Social Protection

Introducing or strengthening welfare schemes such as income support, subsidized housing, childcare allowances, and healthcare benefits can help single mothers meet basic needs and reduce financial stress.

3. Access to Affordable Childcare Services

Establishing affordable and accessible childcare facilities will enable single mothers to participate actively in the labor market while ensuring proper care and development of their children.

4. Mental Health Support Services

Counseling centers, community support groups, and mental health awareness programs should be made easily accessible to single mothers to help them cope with stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges.

5. Strengthening Social Support Networks

Community-based support systems, including self-help groups and women's associations, can provide emotional encouragement, information sharing, and mutual assistance among single mothers.

6. Educational Opportunities and Awareness Programs

Policies should promote educational opportunities for single mothers through scholarships, flexible learning programs, and adult education initiatives, helping them improve their socio-economic status and psychological resilience.

Implementing these policy measures can significantly enhance the economic stability and psychological well-being of single mothers, enabling them to lead more secure and independent lives while ensuring better outcomes for their children.

CONCLUSION

The analysis clearly shows that economic conditions strongly influence the mental health of single mothers in Thoothukudi district. Financial insecurity, debt burden, and unstable employment increase psychological distress, while higher income and supportive networks enhance well-being. Therefore, policies focusing on economic empowerment, skill development, and accessible mental health services are essential to improve the quality of life of single mothers.

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