

## **Single Motherhood in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Life Course Perspective**

**Shelley Clark**

Associate Professor of Sociology  
Canada Research Chair in Youth, Gender and Global Health  
McGill University

**Dana Hamplová**

Assistant Professor & Research Associate  
Charles University & Institute of Sociology, ASC

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Corresponding author: Shelley Clark, Stephen Leacock Building, Room 713, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 2T7, Canada, Phone: 514-398-8822, Fax: 514-398-3403, E-mail: [shelley.clark@mcgill.ca](mailto:shelley.clark@mcgill.ca)

### ***Abstract***

Although the causes and consequences of single motherhood in North America have been explored extensively, research on single motherhood in sub-Saharan Africa is surprisingly thin. This paper using marital history data coupled with birth histories to explore single motherhood over the life course in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. We find that in all countries a substantial proportion of women experience at least one episode of being a single mother before the age of 45, ranging from 30% in Ethiopia to nearly 70% in Zimbabwe. In all countries, except Kenya, women are far more likely to become single mothers following a divorce or death of their spouse rather than as a consequence of a premarital birth. Lastly, we argue that additional research on “single motherhood” may prove to be more useful than previous studies on “female headed-households” in identifying particularly vulnerable groups of women and children.

## ***Introduction***

The topic of single motherhood, particularly its causes and consequences, has received considerable attention in North America. A vast literature documents how rising divorce rates and increases in non-marital fertility in many industrialized countries has affected the well-being of women and children (Amato 2005). Increased conjugal instability and declining rates of marriage have resulted in a significant increase of the number of single-mother families (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2008), which have been shown to have adverse effects across a number of developmental domains of individuals' lives (Heard, Gorman and Kapinus 2008). Indeed, even if women remarry, the impact of divorce and single-motherhood can have long-term negative impacts at all stages of the life course from childhood (Artis 2007; Brown 2004; Gennetian 2005; Magnuson and Berger 2009; Seltzer 1994) to adolescence (Brown and Rinelli 2010) to adulthood (Amato and Keith 1991; Martin, Mills and Le Bourdais 2005; Provencher, Le Bourdais and Marcil-Gratton 2006). In addition, recent research suggests that not only do family structures have an immediate effect on children's well-being, but they may also be responsible for the intergenerational transmission of racial, gender, and economic inequalities (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

In sub-Saharan Africa, however, research on single motherhood, *per se*, is surprisingly limited. Instead there is a tradition of studying *female-headed households* (Buvinic and Gupta 1997; Katapa 2006; Quisumbing, Haddad and Pena 1995). Of course, in many instances female heads of households are virtually synonymous with being a single mother, as many female household heads are unmarried women with young children. In South Africa, for example only 3% of female heads were married and lived with a co-resident spouse (Posel 2010). Despite this high level of overlap, female heads and single mothers capture different populations and allow for different comparisons. Compared to measures of single motherhood, we argue that female headship has several important limitations. First, measures of female headed households generally fail to capture what Buvinic and Gupta (1997) call "sub-families" and what Bradshaw (1995) describes as "disguised" female-headed households because even if they live within male-headed households, single mothers are often largely responsible for their own and their children's welfare. Second, precise and consistent definitions of female-headed households are lacking. Many studies use different definitions of households and have different means of identifying household heads. (See Dungumaro (2009) for a full discussion of the variety of different definitions.) In particular, studies of female-headed households often include a large number of married women whose spouses are migrants. Findings that indicate that these particular female-headed households generally fare better than male-headed households have generated considerable confusion and debate in the literature (Chant 2008), and generally undermined the use of female-headed households as a marker of particularly vulnerable women and children (Appleton 1996; Posel 2001; Quisumbing, Haddad and Pena 2001).

## ***Three main pathways in to single motherhood***

Despite the limited research on single-motherhood, research on premarital fertility, divorce, and widowhood, all suggest that rates of single motherhood may be relatively high and possibly rising throughout sub-Saharan Africa. There are three main ways in which a woman may become a single mother. First, a woman may give birth before she is married. Premarital childbearing in sub-Saharan Africa is quite common and generally considered high by the

standards of Europe or North America. In South Africa, for example, never-married women contribute nearly half of all births to women ages 12 to 26 (Garenne, Tollman and Kahn 2000). Nonetheless, there is considerable variation found throughout sub-Saharan Africa in rates of premarital fertility. In countries such as Burundi, Ghana, and Zimbabwe less than 10% of never-married women aged 15-24 have given birth (Gage-Brandon and Meekers 1993). Some researchers have suggested that the steadily rising age of first marriage for women will inevitably result in higher levels of premarital childbirth. Earlier estimates of premarital childbirth by Meekers (1994) appeared to confirm this hunch. However, more recent data from nine countries in southern and eastern Africa find that despite increasing age of first marriage, premarital fertility rates have remained relatively constant (Harwood-Lejeune 2001). Higher rates of education and urbanization with correspondingly greater knowledge of and access to contraceptives may at least partially explain the why the number of premarital birth has not increased.

A second pathway into single motherhood is through separation or divorce. Several studies have documented a rather astonishing rise in the rates of divorce in sub-Saharan Africa (Blanc and Lloyd 1994; Hutchinson 1990; Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993; Mbugua 1992; Takyi 2001; Takyi and Gymiah 2007). Even in countries where divorce was historically extremely rare, like Nigeria, today an estimated 10% of ever-married women have been divorced (Isiugo-Abanihe 1998). In high divorce countries like Ghana, divorce rates rose from about 40% in the 1970s to over 60% by the late 1980s among ever-married women aged 40-49 (Gage and Njogu 1994). By the age of 50 only about half of women living in Togo are still in their first marriage (Locoh and Thiriart 1995) and about 45% of marriages in Ethiopia will eventually end in divorce (Tilson and Larsen 2000).

Modernization and urbanization have brought about increasing levels of women's autonomy and greater participation in the labor market which may contribute to the rise in divorce rates (Takyi 2006). Studies also consistently show higher levels of divorce in matrilineal societies relative to patrilineal groups (Arnaldo 2004; Takyi 2001; Takyi and Gymiah 2007). Another key predictor of divorce is age of first marriage (Amoateng and Heaton 1989). In Ethiopia, for example, girls who marry before the age of 15 are significantly more likely to get divorced (Tilson and Larsen 2000), while in Mozambique women who marry before the age of 18 have a 24% higher risk of getting divorced than those who marry at age 25 or older (Arnaldo 2004). Lastly, several studies find a large and positive effect of being childless on the probability of divorce (Takyi 2006; Tilson and Larsen 2000). Of course, both childless women and women with adult children would not be considered single mothers.

Lastly, women may become single mothers following the death of a spouse. Older widows may have adult children who are no longer residing in the household and, in fact, these adult children may be an important source of economic assistance to their mothers. Yet, given the relatively low life expectancy for men in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the typically large age differences between husbands and wives, and the continuation of childbearing throughout women's reproductive years, a sizeable proportion of widows are left with the care of younger children. This situation appears to be worsening in countries hit hardest by the AIDS epidemic where life expectancy for both men and women has actually fallen.

In this paper, we explore the prevalence and pathways into single motherhood across five countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. Our primary research question is how common is it for women in these different countries to ever experience an episode of single motherhood. In addition, we compare and contrast the relative importance of entry into single motherhood before marriage and following a marital disruption in each country. Our focus on single motherhood over the life course highlights some of the limitations of research on female-headed households and shows that measures of current marital status significantly underestimate the lifetime risk of single motherhood.

## **Data and Methods:**

To explore single motherhood over the life course, we rely on retrospective marital history calendar data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in Ethiopia (2005), Kenya (2003), Tanzania (2004-2005), Malawi (2004) and Zimbabwe (2005-2006). While these data represent a clear improvement over purely cross-sectional data, they also present some serious challenges and limitations. Most notably the monthly calendar data only cover the last five years prior to the survey. In addition, while the survey collects the date of first marriage for all ever-married women, it does not collect the date of first marital dissolution, if this disruption occurred before the start of the calendar. However, all surveys collected full information on children's date of birth and, if the child has died, their date of death.

Our analysis is based on the marital and birth histories of all women aged 15-49 surveyed in Ethiopia (n=14,070), Kenya (n=8,195), Tanzania (n=10,329), Malawi (n=11,698), and Zimbabwe (n= 8,907). Using data on the date of first marriage and the date of birth for their first child, we first identify women who become single mothers because they give birth before their first marriage. We then assess the cumulative risk of becoming a single mother before marriage by age, starting at age 10 and ending at age 45. A competing risks model is employed as women who get married before the birth of their first child are precluded from becoming premarital single mothers. Women who neither get married nor give birth by the time of the survey are treated as censored.

Second, we define post-marital single mothers as ever-married women who at the time of their marital dissolution had at least one living child under the age of 15. For the large majority of women in all five countries we can fully construct their marital histories. However, the marital histories of women whose first marriages ended more than five years before the survey are left truncated. In addition, we lack information on the cause of the marital disruption (i.e. separation, divorce, or widowhood). Consequently, we estimate the cumulative risk of becoming a single mother after first marriage by age regardless of the type of marital dissolution.

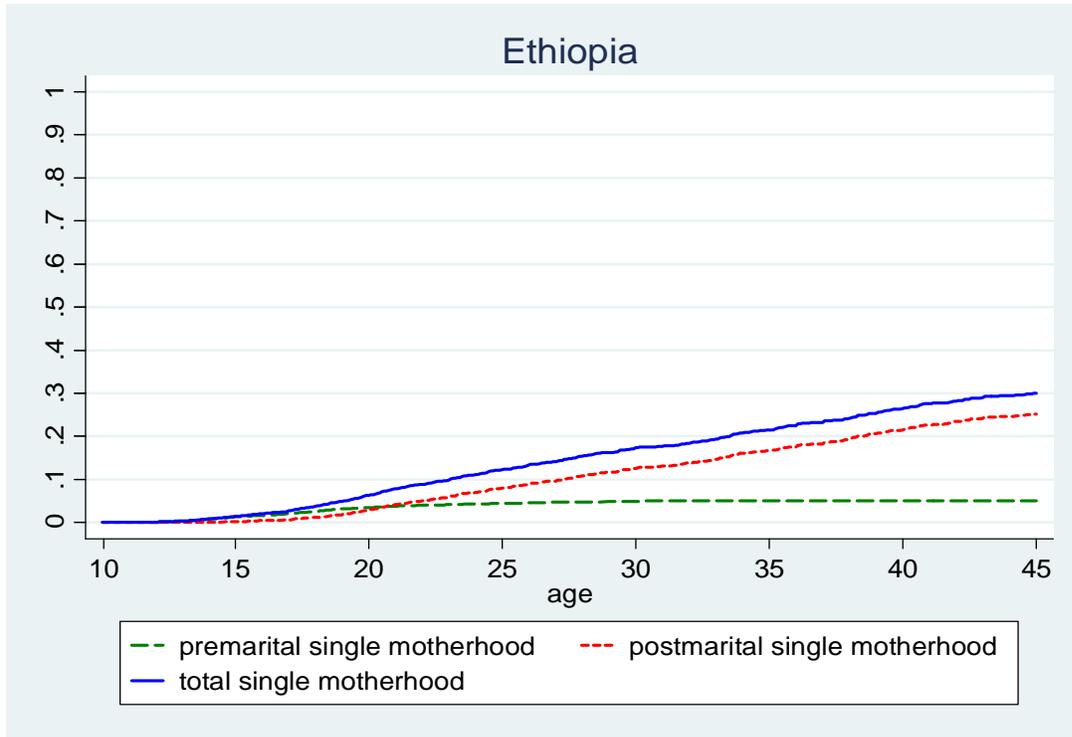
Lastly, we estimate the cumulative failure curves for entry into single motherhood either before or after first marriage. We note that this final curve is not a simple summation of the risk of premarital and post-marital single motherhood because some women may experience both a premarital birth and become a single mother via divorce or widowhood. Indeed, preliminary results (not shown) suggest that in Kenya women who have a premarital birth are subsequently significantly more likely to experience a marital dissolution.

## **Results:**

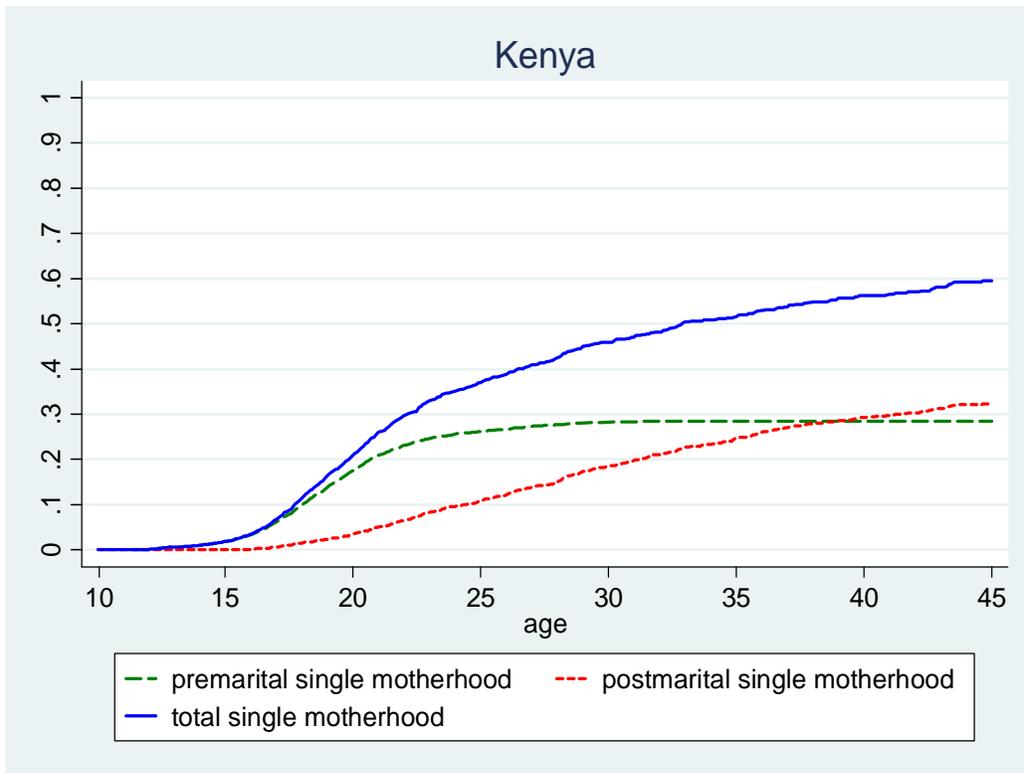
Figures 1 to 5 plot the three cumulative failure curves described above for Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, respectively. Comparing across these five countries reveals several interesting patterns. In all countries, rates of premarital single motherhood rise fastest between the ages of 15 and 20, but that in countries with later ages of first marriage, such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, the cumulative risk continues to rise well into women's early 20s. As a result about 30% of women in Kenya and 18% in both Tanzania and Zimbabwe have a premarital birth. These numbers contrast with less than 5% in Ethiopia and barely above 10% in Malawi.

These figures show even greater variation in the cumulative risk of becoming a single mother after first marriage. While only about 25% of women in Ethiopia will experience an episode of post-marital single motherhood, approximately half of women in both Malawi and Zimbabwe are expected to become single mothers via divorce or widowhood. Moreover, with the notable exception of Kenya, women are far more likely to become single mothers following divorce or death of a spouse than by having a premarital birth. In all countries, the total likelihood of ever being a single mother by the age of 45 is quite substantial: 30.0% in Ethiopia, 59.5% in Kenya, 61.0% in Malawi, 51.7% in Tanzania, and 68.8% in Zimbabwe.

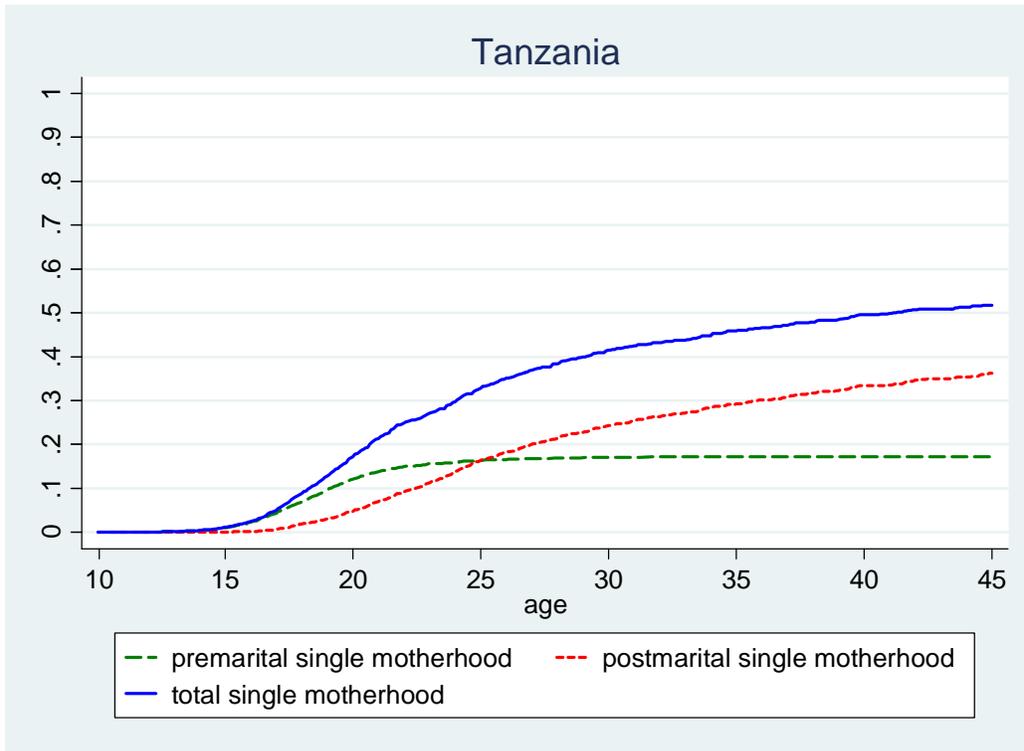
**Figure 1. Cumulative Risk of Becoming a Single Mother by Age in Ethiopia.**



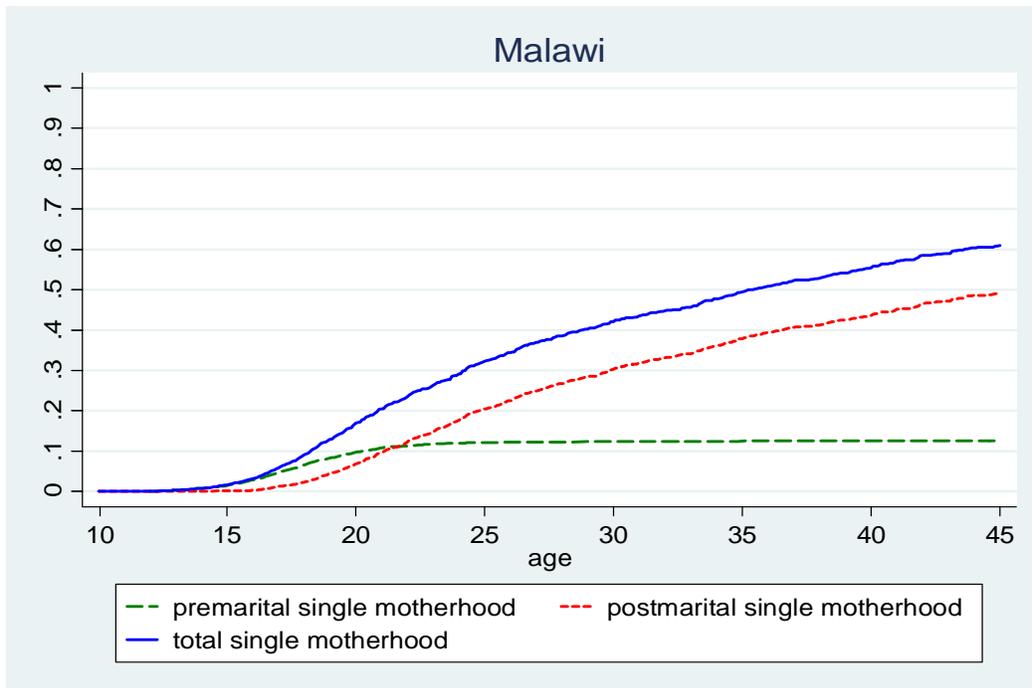
**Figure 2. Cumulative Risk of Becoming a Single Mother by Age in Kenya.**



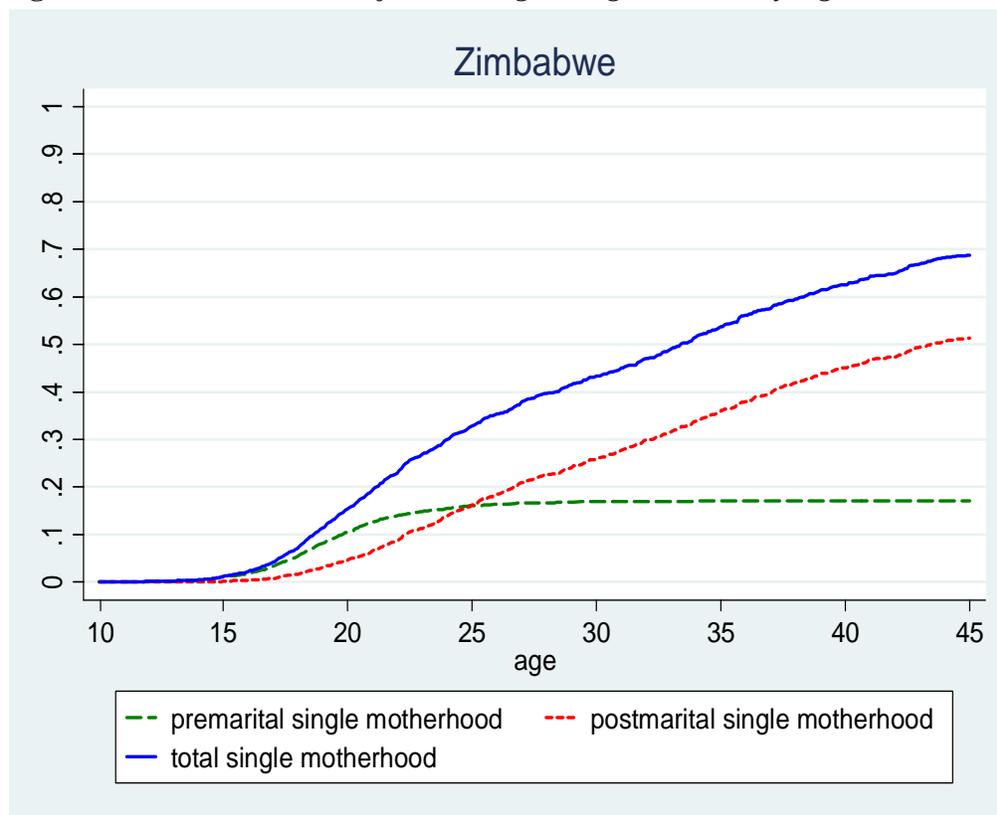
**Figure 3. Cumulative Risk of Becoming a Single Mother by Age in Tanzania.**



**Figure 4. Cumulative Risk of Becoming a Single Mother by Age in Malawi.**



**Figure 5. Cumulative Risk of Becoming a Single Mother by Age in Zimbabwe.**



### **Policy Implications**

These findings have at least two important policy implications. First, by taking a life course perspective we demonstrate that cross-sectional estimates of women who are currently single mothers grossly underestimates women's lifetime chances of ever being a single mother. According to our findings, we estimate that if current trends continue between 30% and 70% of young women in these countries can expect to become a single mother at some point before reaching their 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. To put these numbers in perspective, only approximately 25% of women in Canada experienced an episode of single motherhood (Desrosiers, Le Bourdais and Péron 1993) and about 40% of women in the U.K. will ever become a single mother (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). Since the majority of these women will, therefore, need to support not only themselves, but also their children, such figures offer a clear rationale to invest more in adolescent girls and young women by increasing their schooling and providing them with income-generating skills.

Second, unlike countries in North America and Europe, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa lack welfare and social policies to protect vulnerable individuals from severe economic hardships. As a result, if women cannot provide adequate financial support on their own, they must rely on the generosity of their kin and social networks. Previous efforts to effectively identify vulnerable women and children using female-headed households have failed. Appleton (1996) argues forcefully that women-headed households should not be treated as a target group to receive interventions designed to reduce poverty. Quisumbing and colleagues (2001:pg. 1) directly state that "a focus on male- and female-headed households has perhaps distracted

researchers and policymakers from a more general concern about the link between gender and poverty.” Although more research is required, a closer focus on single motherhood may prove to be a more effective means of identifying an especially vulnerable population of women and children, particularly if episodes of single motherhood have not only short-term implications, but also place these women and children on pathways of greater poverty and disadvantage.

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