Research

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Parenting Experiences as a Single Mother in Türkiye: A Qualitative Study

Türkiye'de Tek Anne Olarak Ebeveynlik Deneyimleri: Nitel Bir Araştırma

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore how single mothers navigate invisible care labour, gendered responsibilities, and emotional exhaustion within a neoliberal–patriarchal welfare context in Türkiye, from a feminist social work perspective.

Method: A qualitative study design was employed. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 single mothers living in a metropolitan city in Türkiye. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via women's support networks and community organizations. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using content analysis with NVivo software. Data saturation was achieved after 14 interviews.

Results: Three overarching themes were identified: (1) Motherhood as a Source of Meaning, (2) Gendered Responsibilities and Structural Burdens, and (3) Burnout and Emotional Erosion. Participants described motherhood as a key source of emotional strength and meaning, while simultaneously experiencing intensified economic hardship, time poverty, and social isolation. The burden of sole caregiving, efforts to compensate for the perceived "absence of a father," and limited institutional support contributed to psychological and physical exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and future-related anxiety.

Conclusion: Single motherhood in Türkiye is shaped by intersecting neoliberal and patriarchal structures that privatize care and intensify women's unpaid labour. Although motherhood provides emotional meaning and resilience, these resources are insufficient to counterbalance structural vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Single motherhood, feminist social work, invisible care labour, burnout

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışma, feminist sosyal hizmet perspektifinden, Türkiye'deki neoliberal-ataerkil refah bağlamında bekar annelerin görünmez bakım işleri, cinsiyete dayalı sorumluluklar ve duygusal tükenmişlikle nasıl başa çıktıklarını araştırmayı amaçlamıştır.

Yöntem: Nitel bir araştırma tasarımı kullanılmıştır. Türkiye'nin bir büyükşehirinde yaşayan 14 bekar anne ile derinlemesine, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Katılımcılar, kadın destek ağları ve toplum örgütleri aracılığıyla amaçlı örnekleme yoluyla seçilmiştir. Görüşmeler ses kaydı alınmış, kelimesi kelimesine yazıya dökülmüş ve NVivo yazılımı ile içerik analizi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. 14 görüşmeden sonra veri doygunluğu sağlanmıştır.

Bulgular: Üç genel tema belirlendi: (1) Annelik bir anlam kaynağı olarak, (2) Cinsiyete dayalı sorumluluklar ve yapısal yükler ve (3) Tükenmişlik ve duygusal erozyon. Katılımcılar, anneliği duygusal güç ve anlamın temel kaynağı olarak tanımlarken, aynı zamanda yoğun ekonomik zorluklar, zaman yoksulluğu ve sosyal izolasyon yaşadıklarını belirttiler. Tek başına bakım yükü, algılanan "babanın yokluğunu" telafi etme çabaları ve sınırlı kurumsal destek, psikolojik ve fiziksel yorgunluğa, yetersizlik duygusuna ve geleceğe ilişkin kaygıya katkıda bulunmuştur.

Sonuç: Türkiye'de tek başına annelik, bakımı özelleştiren ve kadınların ücretsiz emeğini yoğunlaştıran kesişen neoliberal ve ataerkil yapılar tarafından şekillenmektedir. Annelik duygusal anlam ve dayanıklılık sağlasa da, bu kaynaklar yapısal kırılganlıkları dengelemek için yetersizdir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Bekar annelik, feminist sosyal hizmet, görünmez bakım emeği, tükenmişlik

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Introduction

Contemporary social transformations have reshaped family structures worldwide, leading to a steady increase in the number of single mothers (Sihag 2025). These demographic changes draw attention to how care, income generation, and emotional labour are disproportionately carried by women, particularly when divorce, separation, widowhood, or intentional single parenting disrupt the normative model of the heterosexual, married, two-parent family (Ushie et al 2021). From a feminist social work perspective, these shifts reveal how gendered power relations assign primary caregiving roles to women while simultaneously devaluing their care labour in both economic and symbolic terms (Travis 2023).

Existing studies consistently show that single mothers experience heightened levels of financial stress, childcare burden, and social isolation, further complicated by the scarcity of formal support systems (Ushie et al 2021, Baker and O'Connell 2022, Song et al 2022). Beyond economic hardship, single motherhood entails substantial emotional and psychological pressures: feelings of burnout, anxiety, loneliness, and guilt are frequently reported, as mothers attempt to reconcile caregiving responsibilities with employment, household management, and social expectations (Zagel and Van Lancker 2022). Feminist scholars argue that this form of invisible, unpaid labour reflects broader patterns of devaluation within neoliberal and patriarchal societies, where care is privatized and individualized, and where women are held responsible for managing risk, household reproduction, and children's wellbeing (Schmidt et al 2023).

Single motherhood also challenges dominant ideologies of the "normal" family. In many cultural contexts, lone mothers become symbolic figures through which moral discourses about respectability, 'good motherhood', and sexual propriety are enforced (Travis 2023). These discourses generate stigma and social surveillance, particularly towards divorced or never-married mothers, while widowed mothers may receive comparatively greater understanding and sympathy. Such distinctions underscore how stigma is not merely personal but is shaped by gendered, cultural, and institutional norms that differentially regulate women's family forms (Rahman et al 2025).

Although quantitative research has documented the psychosocial and economic challenges of single motherhood, qualitative studies that centre women's experiences and narratives remain limited (Baker and O'Connell 2022, Schmidt et al 2023, Cheung 2023). Moreover, feminist social work contributions highlight that lone motherhood is not only a site of vulnerability but also one of meaning-making, agency, and negotiation, as women navigate caregiving within constraining structural conditions. Despite this insight, there is still insufficient qualitative evidence that examines how single mothers articulate and interpret their emotional labour, parenting practices, and coping strategies under the intersecting pressures of care responsibility, social stigma, and scarce support mechanisms (Clark et al 2021).

These research gaps are particularly salient in Türkiye, where the nuclear, married family continues to be idealized and where single mothers' access to social rights, welfare benefits, and institutional support remains limited or contested (Buğra and Keyder 2006). In this context, the transition to single motherhood is shaped not only by financial and legal barriers but also by cultural expectations that define motherhood as both a moral duty and a source of identity (Sunikka-Blank and Galvin 2021). Yet, the subjective and affective dimensions of this transition—such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of incompleteness—often remain invisible in public and academic discourse (Clark et al 2021).

Drawing on feminist social work perspectives, this qualitative study aims to explore the lived experiences of single mothers, with particular attention to how they negotiate invisible care labour, stigma, and emotional distress within neoliberal–patriarchal structures (Ware 2024). By centering women's voices, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of lone motherhood that accounts for both structural constraints and women's agency in everyday life.

Existing research on single motherhood largely focuses on economic indicators, mental health outcomes, or parenting stress; however, relatively few studies examine how single mothers negotiate care labour, stigma, and emotional burnout within patriarchal and neoliberal family systems. Moreover, while quantitative studies document the socioeconomic disadvantages of single motherhood, the lived

experiences, meaning-making processes, and everyday negotiations of care remain underexplored, particularly within the context of Türkiye. (Ilkkaracan Kim and Kaya 2015). There is also a lack of feminist social work-oriented studies that analyze single motherhood as a gendered and structural phenomenon rather than a purely individual or psychological outcome. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis that centres single mothers' voices and situates their experiences within broader ideological and structural dynamics.

H1: Single mothers experience motherhood simultaneously as a source of personal meaning and resilience, and as a structurally mediated burden associated with economic precarity, limited institutional support, and social stigma.

H2: The accumulation of sole caregiving responsibilities and limited social and institutional support is associated with emotional burnout, psychological exhaustion, and erosion of self among single mothers.

Method

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Istanbul Arel University Ethics Committee (Approval No: 27.12.2024 / 2024/25-05). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. This study was conducted in Türkiye between December 2024 and January 2025. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, whereby initial participants who met the inclusion criteria referred other eligible single mothers within their social networks. This approach was chosen to facilitate access to single mothers who may be difficult to reach due to time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and social stigma.

All interviews were conducted remotely via secure online video-conferencing platforms, based on participants' preferences and availability. Online interviews enabled flexible scheduling and reduced participation barriers for mothers with intensive caregiving and work responsibilities. Prior to each interview, participants received detailed information about the study and provided informed consent electronically. Data security and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. Online interviews were conducted in private virtual rooms, and participants were advised to join from a quiet and confidential location. Audio recordings and transcripts were anonymized at the time of transcription. All digital data were stored on password-protected and encrypted institutional devices accessible only to the research team.

The interviews were conducted by two researchers with doctoral-level training in qualitative research and women's health/social work. One researcher served as the primary interviewer, while the second researcher provided support and field notes when necessary. Data coding and thematic analysis were independently conducted by four researchers experienced in qualitative methods, and regular team meetings were held to ensure analytical rigor and consistency.

Sample

This qualitative study was conducted with 14 single mothers living in a metropolitan city in Türkiye. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include women who were divorced, widowed, or separated and who were willing to share their experiences. Purposive sampling was preferred as it allows for the selection of participants with direct experience of lone motherhood, which is considered essential for capturing in-depth and contextually grounded narratives within qualitative research and feminist social work scholarship. An introductory information form was used to collect demographic data such as age, education level, number of children, duration of employment, and financial status. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure maximum relevance to the research aim. Potential participants were reached via women's support networks, social media platforms, and community-based organizations that work with divorced or widowed women. Eligible women who expressed interest were

contacted individually and provided detailed study information before participation. Recruitment continued until analytical saturation was achieved, at which point no new conceptual insights emerged from further interviews.

Data Collection

Data were obtained through in-depth, face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide consisted of five key questions and additional probing questions (Table 1). Interviews were conducted in a private and quiet room to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study, the interview process, their right to withdraw at any time, and the use of audio recording. Interviews were recorded when permitted by participants; when audio recording was not allowed, two researchers conducted the session—one interviewer and one note-taker—to ensure the accuracy of the data. Active listening techniques were used to minimize power imbalances and to support participants in directing the flow of the conversation. The interview guide was reviewed by two experts in qualitative research and women's studies for content relevance and clarity. A brief pilot was then conducted with two participants to assess the comprehensibility and flow of the questions. Since no major revisions were deemed necessary, the pilot interviews were not included in the final dataset, and the guide was used for data collection.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview questions	
1.	How would you describe your motherhood? How did you decide to become a mother (instinctive, rational, unplanned)?
2.	How has being a single mother affected your life? In which areas of life does being a single mother cause you difficulties (social, economic) do you feel restricted?
3.	Can you describe the burdens of single motherhood on you (childcare, housework, workload, etc.)?
4.	What do you do socially and culturally? What are your social activities with your children? What are your expectations from life?
5.	When you evaluate yourself physically and psychologically, do you feel healthy and what do you think about it (fatigue, insomnia, lack of exercise, unbalanced diet, time problems, anxiety, stress, etc.)?

Researcher Positionality

This study was informed by a feminist social work perspective that centers women's voices, lived experiences, and agency. The researchers acknowledged the gendered power dynamics inherent in qualitative interviews and consciously minimized hierarchical interactions by adopting an empathetic, non-directive, and conversational approach. As women working in the fields of social work and women's health, the researchers approached the participants with an awareness of shared gendered experiences while also recognizing differences in socioeconomic status, caregiving responsibilities, and life circumstances. Reflexive notes were kept throughout data collection and analysis to monitor how the researchers' own assumptions, emotions, and positionalities might shape interpretation.

Feminist Ethical Considerations

Given that single mothers often occupy socially and economically marginalized positions, feminist ethical principles guided both the data collection process and the researcher–participant relationship. A safe, non-judgmental atmosphere was established to support emotional expression and minimize potential feelings of shame or stigma. Participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw from the interview at any time. Confidentiality was emphasized not only as a formal requirement but as a feminist commitment to protecting women who may face scrutiny or discrimination for openly sharing their experiences. When emotional distress emerged, grounding techniques were used, and participants were provided with information on accessible psychosocial support services.

Data Saturation

Data saturation was monitored throughout the interview process and determined based on redundancy of

codes and conceptual repetition. After the twelfth interview, no substantially new themes were identified, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation. Thus, thematic saturation was considered achieved after 14 interviews. Saturation was evaluated based on the recurrence of codes and the absence of new conceptual content, which is consistent with qualitative research standards for determining analytical adequacy. This aligns with methodological recommendations suggesting that 10–15 in-depth interviews are often sufficient for thematic saturation in focused qualitative research (Guest et al 2006, Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility and reliability, all transcripts and coding schemes were independently reviewed by four researchers experienced in qualitative methods and women's studies. Inter-coder agreement was calculated as .85, indicating high consistency. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Thick descriptions, direct quotations, and reflexive documentation were used to enhance confirmability and transferability.

Reporting Standards

The reporting of this qualitative study adheres to the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) checklist, which is recommended by the EQUATOR Network for enhancing transparency and rigor in qualitative interview studies. "Consistency percentage = Number of agreements/ (Number of agreements+ Number of Disagreements) ". A reliability assessment method was used to determine the consistency of the data obtained using this formula. The reliability coefficient calculated according to this formula was found to be 0.85 (Connelly, 2016).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and transferred into NVivo (QSR) to facilitate systematic analysis. The analysis followed a multi-step content analysis procedure: (1) repeatedly reading transcripts for familiarization, (2) open coding of meaningful expressions, (3) clustering codes into subcategories, (4) merging subcategories into themes, and (5) reviewing and refining themes in relation to the research questions. Throughout the analytical process, a feminist interpretive lens was applied to identify how participants' experiences reflected broader gendered and structural dynamics. To enhance credibility, four researchers independently coded the data and met regularly to discuss discrepancies until full consensus on themes and coding boundaries was reached.

The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. All transcriptions and detailed field notes (from interviews without audio recording) were transferred into NVivo software to support systematic coding. The analysis process followed several steps: (1) repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity, (2) initial coding of meaningful expressions, (3) clustering of codes into subthemes, and (4) identification of overarching themes. A feminist analytical lens was applied throughout the process. This included centering women's narratives, identifying structural and gendered patterns in their accounts, and interpreting the findings in relation to broader societal norms such as expectations of caregiving, patriarchal family ideals, and the devaluation of women's labor. Thus, the goal was not only to describe single mothers' experiences but also to illuminate the sociopolitical structures that shape and constrain them. Decisions regarding the clustering of codes and the construction of themes were made through iterative discussions among researchers, taking into account feminist social work principles such as the visibility of care labour, gendered power relations, and stigma in everyday life. The items in the interview guide were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on their lived experiences rather than to direct them toward predefined responses. For instance, the parenthetical examples (e.g., fatigue, anxiety) were used as internal prompts for the interviewer and were not read aloud to participants. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to describe their own perceptions and expressions, which helped reduce confirmation bias and maintain openness.

Results

The age range of the 14 women included in the study was 23-41 years (mean age 34 ± 4.97 years), 50% were university graduates and 21.4% were high school graduates. It was determined that the average working hours of the women was 9±85 and 50% of them had poor economic status (Table 2).

In line with the interviews conducted with the participants, the findings obtained based on content analysis in the study were conceptualized as three main themes: "Motherhood as a Source of Meaning", "Gendered Responsibilities and Structural Burdens" and " Burnout and Emotional Erosion". Sub-themes and codes related to the main themes of were determined (Table 3).

The analysis revealed three overarching themes that reflect the gendered, structural, and emotional dimensions of single motherhood within a neoliberal–patriarchal context: Motherhood as a Source of Meaning, Gendered Responsibilities and Structural Burdens, and Burnout and Emotional Erosion. Each theme captures how women negotiate invisible care labour, social expectations, and the pressures of sole caregiving.

Theme 1. Motherhood as a Source of Meaning

Although single motherhood was accompanied by multiple hardships, participants consistently described motherhood as a deeply meaningful and spiritually grounding experience. Eight subcodes—such as unconditional love, miracle, increased engagement in life, and feeling proud of the child—captured how motherhood strengthened women's emotional resilience. Participants framed motherhood as a source of moral worth and emotional survival, often describing their children as the primary motivation for navigating structural and financial difficulties.

Participant B (35): "Motherhood is very sacred to me... My children are the meaning of my life. I am glad they exist."

Participant E (29): "It is the only feeling you miss even when your child is next to you. Even your own life feels less important."

These accounts illustrate how women draw strength from motherhood, while simultaneously being expected—by cultural and patriarchal norms—to perform idealized forms of "good mothering." Motherhood thus becomes both an emotional anchor and a social expectation that shapes women's daily negotiations of care.

Participant H (39): To tell you the truth, I wasn't very keen on becoming a mother. It happened because my husband and his family wanted it. There's a social expectation for us women to become mothers, there's pressure... I divorced my husband and I'm raising my child alone....

Theme 2. Gendered Responsibilities and Structural Burdens

The second theme reflects how invisible care labour, financial insecurity, and the pressure to compensate for the "absence of a father" intensify the responsibilities of single mothers. Subcodes such as failure to keep up financially, no time for social life, declining performance at work, and taking sole responsibility for children highlight the intersection of gendered expectations and limited structural support.

Participants described juggling paid work and extensive unpaid caregiving, often sacrificing personal time, social life, and career aspirations.

Participant L (41): "I have a lot of economic difficulties. I can hardly live on one salary... my two daughters depend on me.

Participant J (35): "I do everything alone in this life. There is no one around to support me. I cannot keep up with life.

Participant G (23): I can't discipline my child. I can't manage my home. I don't have the strength. He wants me to do his homework with him in the evening, but I can't keep up. All my energy is spent at work...

Table 2. Descriptive characteristics of participants

Participants	Age	Education level	Number of children	Financial situation	Working time (hrs/day)
Participant A	31	High School	2	Bad	5
Participant B	35	University	3	Middle	7
Participant C	39	Postgraduate	2	Bad	19
Participant D	34	University	1	Middle	11
Participant E	29	University	2	Middle	3
Participant F	34	University	1	Bad	10
Participant G	23	High School	1	Middle	2
Participant H	39	University	2	Bad	14
Participant I	30	Postgraduate	2	Middle	10
Participant J	35	High School	3	Bad	9
Participant K	33	University	3	Bad	11
Participant L	41	University	1	Good.	12
Participant M	35	Postgraduate	2	Middle	10
Participant N	37	Postgraduate	2	Bad	15

** There is more than one answer. The number of answers is indicated as "n"

Table 3. Analysis of the subthemes and codes related to the main themes

Main Theme 1		
Motherhood as a Source of Meaning		
Sub Themes	Codes	n*
Positive affect	Unconditional love	11
	Miracle	8
	Loving and Being Loved	6
	Witnessing your children grow up	6
	Increased engagement in life	8
	Motherhood as a sacred duty	5
	Spiritual pleasure and joy	7
	Being proud of your children	8
Main Theme 2		
Gendered Responsibilities and Structural Burdens		
Sub Themes	Codes	n*
Material, Emotional, and Social Constraints	Failure to provide the best for children (Economic strain)	10
	Trying to compensate for the absence of a father	7
	Financial insufficiency / inability to keep up	8
	Feeling 'not enough' for children	8
	Taking sole responsibility for children	7
	No time for personal or social life	11
	Lack of social life	9
	Declining performance at work/inability to prioritize career	10
Main Theme 3		
Burnout and Emotional Erosion		
Sub Themes	Codes	n*
Negative affect	Future anxiety	14
	Feeling alone	12
	Lack of energy	12
	Mental fatigue	11
	Feeling worthless	9
	Fear of death (concern about leaving children alone	5
	Physical exhaustion	10
	Codes	6

Many mothers emphasized the emotional burden of trying to shield their children from stigma or from "feeling the father's absence," showing how patriarchal family norms shape maternal labour.

Participant H (39): "My children have requests, but I cannot afford them. Not being able to meet their needs hurts me deeply."

This theme reflects a core feminist insight: single mothers perform intensified, devalued, and culturally invisible care labour that is structurally unsupported and morally judged.

Theme 3. Burnout and Emotional Erosion

The final theme captured the psychological and physical exhaustion resulting from continuous caregiving, economic hardship, and social isolation. Subcodes such as future anxiety, feeling alone, not feeling energetic, physical tiredness, fear of death, and feeling worthless reveal a multidimensional pattern of burnout. Participants stated that they felt physically and mentally exhausted at work and that they did not have the time or physical energy left to care for their children at home. The most significant factors contributing to the concept of burnout expressed by 14 women can be attributed to situations such as the death of their spouse and divorced women being unable to receive financial and material support from their children's fathers.

Participants described chronic fatigue and emotional depletion caused by carrying all caregiving responsibilities alone:

Participant C (39): "I have to solve every problem. Physically and psychologically, sometimes I feel exhausted... I feel like I have lost myself."

Participant M (35): "My children want to play or go to the park, but I cannot afford it. Seeing myself tired in their eyes breaks me."

Participant N (37): "Growing up without a father is hard... My son asks, "Everyone has a father. Where's mine? I want to cry out loud, I can't answer".

Participant L (41):" I am an unhappy mother, I can't shake the feeling that I'm not a good mother, these thoughts are consuming me....

Burnout was also shaped by internalized pressure to maintain strength: mothers described feeling responsible for being "emotionally stable," "productive at work," and "good mothers" simultaneously—reflecting neoliberal demands for constant productivity and patriarchal expectations of maternal self-sacrifice.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that single motherhood generates a multidimensional burden on mothers and that, despite the positive emotional meanings attached to motherhood, undertaking financial, social, and moral responsibilities alone increases burnout levels. In this regard, developing economic and social support mechanisms, facilitating policies on work–life balance, and expanding psychological support services may enable single mothers to plan a healthier future for themselves and their children. However, positive experiences related to motherhood—such as unconditional love, miracle-like meanings, mutual affection, spiritual pleasure, and increased engagement with life—are not sufficient on their own to counterbalance structural constraints. These findings align with feminist analyses suggesting that intensive mothering ideals coexist with the devaluation of women's care labour, placing mothers in a position where emotional fulfilment does not negate structural precarity (Hays 1996, Fraser 2016). In addition, these findings illustrate how the neoliberal ideal of the "self-reliant mother"—which celebrates resilience and emotional fulfilment—can obscure structural vulnerabilities, producing an affective contradiction between personal meaning and structural strain.

The multidimensional responsibilities undertaken by single mothers lead to difficulties at both individual and social levels. Economic strain, limited access to resources, and time poverty appeared as central

mechanisms shaping anxiety and guilt in the parenting role. Existing research similarly demonstrates that financial constraints, inflationary pressures, and limited social services exacerbate depression, anxiety, and stress among low-income single mothers, especially during the pandemic (Zakaria et al 2022). Economic stress has also been shown to reduce satisfaction with the mother–child relationship, negatively influencing children's social development (Sihag 2025). Parallel to the current findings, financial insufficiency and loneliness appear as prominent problems in other contexts as well (Ware 2024), indicating that economic and emotional risks are deeply intertwined for single mothers. These results resonate with comparative social policy analyses suggesting that single mothers are particularly vulnerable within welfare regimes characterized by familism and weak social support structures, in which care obligations are privatized within the household rather than redistributed through the state.

Another noteworthy dimension concerns the effort to "compensate for the absence of a father" and the accompanying anxiety of "not being enough for the children." This finding reflects the stigmatization and sense of incompleteness associated with mothering outside the two-parent family model. Feminist social work literature emphasizes that lone mothers often negotiate cultural scripts of idealized family norms and gendered parenthood, which may result in internalized pressure to perform both maternal and paternal roles simultaneously (Clark 2021, Tabassum and Nayak 2021). In patriarchal contexts, where fatherhood is linked to authority, protection, and economic provision, single mothers face additional emotional and symbolic burdens that extend beyond material deprivation. Moreover, the absence of social life or limited time for personal needs indicates not only time poverty but also affective inequalities, wherein women's emotional needs are deprioritized in favour of caregiving responsibilities (Lynch 2007). Such dynamics may lead to loneliness, social isolation, and psychological wear, contributing to lower quality of life (Kim and Kim 2020). As noted in other studies, some mothers resort to unhealthy coping strategies, while others turn to religious feelings as a protective source of meaning and resilience (Zakaria et al 2019, Dharani and Balamurugan 2024). The coexistence of both protective and worsening factors reveals that single motherhood is not experienced homogeneously; rather, care responsibilities, economic insecurity, and cultural stigma interact with mothers' coping resources, producing differentiated emotional trajectories.

Despite these challenges, positive elements of motherhood such as unconditional love, witnessing children grow, and mutual affection serve as emotionally grounding factors. The accounts of participants indicate that such experiences strengthen meaning-making processes, increase spiritual attachment, and enhance parental resilience. This resonates with studies suggesting that love, caregiving motivation, and pride function as internal coping resources that mitigate maternal stress and contribute to resilience (Zagel and Van Lancker 2022). However, within a neoliberal–patriarchal environment, these emotional resources coexist with structural burdens rather than replacing them; thus, individual resilience does not eliminate structural vulnerability. This dynamic suggests that the "meaningfulness of motherhood" can operate both as a coping mechanism and as an ideological mechanism that normalizes women's unpaid care labour, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and legitimizing the privatization of care within families.

Another dimension of the study concerns the theme of "declining performance at work and inability to prioritize career," which reflects the temporal and emotional strain of balancing paid and unpaid labour. Feminist social work and care labour scholarship highlight that single mothers occupy a dual position as both workers and caregivers, and that the costs of reconciling these roles disproportionately fall on women (Tronto 2013, Fraser 2016). The findings confirm literature indicating that single mothers face structural and gendered limitations to career development (De Guzman Natividad and Mateo 2024). Moreover, concern for children's safety and future intensifies existential anxiety, particularly when mothers perceive themselves as the sole source of material and emotional security (Rahman et al 2025). Combined with chronic multitasking, housework, and childcare, this dynamic generates ongoing physical and mental fatigue, consistent with previous evidence linking time poverty to reduced quality of life and performance (Tarar et al 2021).

The fear of death, frequently noted by participants in this study, highlights how single motherhood entails not only practical burdens but also existential responsibilities, as mothers worry about their children's survival and well-being in their absence (Zimmer-Gembeck et al 2022). Importantly, the participants'

experiences of burnout varied in intensity and form, suggesting that socioeconomic status, social network support, and access to childcare may function as differentiating factors that protect against or exacerbate burnout. Such variation aligns with research emphasizing the importance of intersectional social positioning in shaping maternal well-being.

The contextual characteristics of Türkiye also play an important role in shaping these dynamics. According to national data, single-parent households constitute approximately 9–10% of all households, and the vast majority of single parents are women (TÜİK 2023). Unlike Nordic welfare regimes, where childcare services and income redistribution mechanisms buffer single mothers from severe poverty, contexts such as Türkiye are marked by limited state support for care, familistic expectations, and the persistence of traditional family norms. These cultural and policy environments amplify stigma and privatize care, making single motherhood both socially visible and institutionally unsupported.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a growing body of research indicating that single motherhood should not be conceptualized solely as a family form, but rather as a gendered and structural phenomenon shaped by neoliberal economic policies, patriarchal family ideologies, and care labour inequalities (Chavda and Nisarga 2023). Increasing visibility of women's labour, strengthening social and community-based support services, expanding access to economic resources, and improving work–life balance policies may help mitigate the multidimensional challenges faced by single mothers. From a feminist social work perspective, addressing single motherhood requires interventions that recognize women not only as caregivers but also as social agents embedded in structural systems of gender, labour, and welfare (Dean Churchill and Ruppanner 2022).

In this sense, the present study offers an empirically grounded and contextually situated insight into single motherhood in Türkiye, contributing to international discussions on care labour, stigma, and maternal well-being. By situating the findings within Türkiye's welfare and cultural context, the study also illustrates how local configurations of family ideology, religious norms, economic precarity, and policy infrastructures shape the lived realities of single mothers. By addressing this gap, the present study contributes to three strands of literature: (1) feminist analyses of care labour and motherhood, (2) social work research on family and welfare systems, and (3) qualitative research on lone motherhood. Empirically, the study provides novel evidence from Türkiye, a context in which single motherhood remains stigmatized and underexamined. Theoretically, it reframes single motherhood as a gendered and structural phenomenon shaped by care inequalities, patriarchal family norms, and neoliberal expectations of productivity. From a practice perspective, the study underscores the need for support mechanisms that recognize mothers as both caregivers and social agents embedded in structural constraints. Collectively, these contributions highlight the importance of integrating feminist social work frameworks with social policy debates in order to advance more equitable and context-specific responses to single motherhood.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized to all single mothers, as the sample consisted of 14 participants living in Istanbul. Although thematic saturation was achieved, the relatively small and context-specific sample limits transferability. Second, as the data relied on self-reported narratives, social desirability concerns may have influenced how participants expressed their experiences. Third, psychiatric history and current treatment status were not systematically assessed; therefore, emotional expressions such as anxiety, loneliness, and exhaustion should be interpreted without assuming underlying clinical diagnoses. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on women's care labour within single motherhood, preventing comparison with other family structures or caregiving models. Fifth, although the study adhered to the COREQ checklist to enhance methodological transparency, the interview guide contained some conceptual overlap, which may have produced repetitive responses. In addition, the parenthetical examples in one item may raise concerns regarding confirmation bias, even though participants ultimately articulated their own experiences in their own words. These limitations underscore the importance of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry and indicate opportunities for future research to further expand the contextual and comparative dimensions of single motherhood.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, several actionable recommendations can be proposed. Strengthening social and economic support mechanisms for single mothers—including childcare support, flexible working arrangements, and financial assistance—may reduce the burden of unpaid care and improve work–life balance. Psychosocial support services and community-based programs could help address burnout, loneliness, and anxiety, while reducing the stigma surrounding single motherhood. Finally, feminist social work interventions that recognize single mothers as social agents rather than solely caregivers may contribute to empowerment and resilience at both individual and structural levels.

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