

Singled Out: Invisibilization of Single Mothers in Social Welfare and Protection Policies

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ABSTRACT:

In the context of Southeast Asia, data on the experiences and circumstances of single mothers are sparse and single mothers continue to experience stereotypes, discrimination, exclusion from welfare policies, and invisibilization of compounding burdens they carry. This literature mapping of scholarly works on welfare policies for single mothers and their families seeks to highlight single mother's experiences as inputs for a more gender- and needs-responsive policy-making process. The study findings reveal that most Southeast Asian countries have apparent social welfare policies for single mothers except Laos and Indonesia. Common programs for single mothers include entrepreneurship capacity and financial aid. A two-pronged approach for Southeast Asian Countries that incorporates accessible childcare services and vocational training programs is recommended to achieve more promising outcomes for single mothers.

Keywords: Single Mothers; Social Welfare; Policies

INTRODUCTION

A growing interest is apparent in developing social protection strategies and programs to address the enduring gender-based inequalities in developing countries and promote women's socio-economic empowerment (Jones, Stravropoulou, & Presler-Marshall, 2013). Since the 1990s, women's poverty has attracted economists and policymakers ([Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2009](#)). This interest is due in part to the growing presence of women in the labor force and the economy as a whole ([Destro & Brady, 2011](#)). Moreover, the expansion of females' participation in the labor force has not been limited to married or childless women but to single mothers. For specific groups of women, such as single mothers, participation in the workforce is hindered by the general lack of

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accessible services and skills to contribute to the overall economic productivity ([Zhou, McKenzie, Ma, Oishi, & Abe, 2011](#)). Single motherhood can be associated with a host of economic disadvantages, that can potentially amplify social inequalities highlighting the need for assistance and support to overcome such disadvantageous circumstances. However, the scope of inclusivity of social protection continues to be lacking for some countries in regions like Southeast Asia. The existence of a patriarchal culture in Southeast Asia is among the factors that influence women's status before the law and in society ([Nurcahyo, 2018](#)). As a result of a patriarchal culture and misogynist interpretations of religion and society, women can only remain silent and fully surrender to the sphere of culture and religion interpretation ([Arfiansyah, 2018](#)). The traditional negative focus on the this family structure's deviance has led to blaming unmarried women rather than implementing economic and social support structures that could lift their families out of poverty ([Schmitz, 1995](#)). Frequently, most of the government's concern was about women's position in the political stage and their rights as mothers. Yet, the government has limited action to cover the issues of female-headed households, most especially single mothers. Furthermore, women solo parenting remains to be an existing gap in gender studies. There are only few documented experiences of programs that target female headship and their consequences ([Buvinic and Gupta, 1997](#)). Single mothers in developing countries deserve special attention as they are traditionally disadvantaged in terms of access to property, labor, finance and insurance markets. They are discriminated against cultural norms and suffer from, among other things, high dependency pressures, economic immobility and a "double-day burden" on their heads ([Ferguson, 2003](#)). They may be more vulnerable to deprivation as they face higher risks and/or have fewer options in many fields ([Branisa et al., 2009](#)). A case in point is Malaysia. In 2012, poverty incidence among female-headed households is higher at 2.1 percent than in male-headed households ([Department of Statis-](#)

[tics, Malaysia, 2012](#); [Endut, Azmawati, Hashim, 2015](#)). In Indonesia, a similar trend is observed. The number of female-headed households living in poverty is higher than male-headed households and factors identified to have contributed to this disparity are education and the number of household members ([Pukuh & Widyasthika, 2018](#)). “Also, Schaner ([2012](#)) revealed that female-headed households in Indonesia have fewer assets, poorer quality homes, and limited access to substantially less earned income”. Female-headed households are in a more disadvantaged position due to failure to implement social welfare and protection programs inclusive to vulnerable groups such as single mothers, women from ethnic minorities, refugees, stateless women, and older women ([Jones, Stravropoulou, & Presler-Marshall, 2013](#)). Policies for single mothers tend to be predominantly neo-liberal in nature, whereby single mothers are only viewed based on their relationship to the labor market and the economy ([Lavee, 2016](#)). Hence, welfare policies are heavily focused on providing employment opportunities for single mothers in relation to increasing their productivity, but it also fails to take into account the maternal role of mothers that might be neglected at the expense of work ([Løken, Lommerud, & Holm Reiso, 2018](#)). The lack of context-sensitive support for solo mothers can cause more harm as it fails to account lived realities of solo mothers and their children, including their limited access to social networks and social protection ([Martin, Flatøa/ :Raya, Muttarak/ : André, 2017](#)) and their limited access to livelihood ([Daoud, Shadia Abdelrahim Mohamed; Gindeel, Randa Hamza; Ahmed, 2019](#)). The identification and assessment of social welfare and protection policies within the Southeast Asian region in relation to the persistent exclusion of certain groups of women in developing effective social protection and welfare schemes is a subject that requires attention. While several researches have directed their focus on single mothers ([B Abd Hamid & Salle, 2013](#); [Barone, 2016](#); [Evans, 2011](#); [Destro & Brady, 2015](#)), this article takes a different approach by identifying general services and programs provided for single

mothers based on existing legislations in ten (10) Southeast Asian countries. This approach dwells less on a bottom-up approach but instead is analyzing existing programs and services for single mothers from a top-down approach. In this article, we explore using a comparative lens, the existing social protection and welfare policies legislated to cater to single mothers' needs and concerns in Southeast Asia. The scope of our article covers Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. This study emerged to (1) identify the existing social protection and welfare policies of solo-parenting, specifically single motherhood, in Southeast Asia; and (2) derive implications from existing literatures about the impact of social programs for single mothers

RESEARCH METHODS

This research explores the policies set forth respectively by ten Southeast Asian Countries for the social protection and welfare of single mothers. The ten Southeast Asian Countries that were the principal foci of the study are the members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. The researchers employed a qualitative research design and investigated the social protection and welfare policies put in place by the ten Southeast Asian countries. A qualitative research focus on understanding a research query as humanistic or ideal – to understand peoples' belief, experiences attitudes, behavior and interaction – and thus it produces non-numerical data ([Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013](#)). In qualitative research, techniques include small group discussion, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews, and document or text analysis encompassing government reports, media articles, websites or diaries, to learn about distributed or private knowledge ([Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016](#)). In order to achieve the objective of this study, the researchers employed the use and analyses of secondary data through dis-

course analysis. Secondary analysis is a research methodology by which researchers use pre-existing data in order to investigate new questions or for the verification of the findings of previous works ([Heaton, 2019](#)). “According to Punch ([2005](#)), as cited by ([Chivaka, 2018](#)), secondary data analysis pertains to the reanalysis of data that has been previously collected and analyzed. Analyses of the data gathered will be conducted through a comparative method of analysis”. “According to Pickave ([2005](#)), comparative analysis, as cited by Adiyia and Ashton ([2017](#)), is utilized generally to explain and gain finer understanding in the causal process in creating an event, feature or relationship, often by assembling variations in the explanatory variable or variables”. Individualizing comparison as a variety of comparative analysis will be evidently utilized in this study. Individualizing comparison is defined as comparing ‘a small number of cases in order to grasp the peculiarities of each case’ ([Tilly, 1984, as cited in Adiyia & Ashton, 2017](#)).

A total of 45 articles was found from a search of articles in Google Scholar. Eleven articles were publications from government, international governmental organizations and Non-governmental Organizations. Three of the articles are from conference papers and policy briefs. The rest were journal articles. Out of the plethora of scholarly work gathered, the articles were reduced based on its relevance to the research with the following criteria: (1) Research focus is single-mothers or female-headed households and (2) Research setting is in any of the Southeast Asian countries. From those criteria, thirty-one articles were identified which specifically focus on single mothers and female-headed households. Only twelve specifically focused on single mothers in Southeast Asia. journal articles. Thus, a total of twelve articles were used for analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research stems from the issue of women in marginalized sectors, drawing specifically on the unique experiences of women

solo parents in Southeast Asia and identifying existing social protection and welfare programs to address the socio-economic hardships faced by single mothers in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, this research derives implications from studies concerning the programs and intervention aimed at single mothers, increasing the likelihood of a better socio-economic condition of single mothers.

SINGLE MOTHERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As a phenomenon studied in a number of literatures, single motherhood is portrayed as a particularly challenging circumstance. Single mothers of social and economic difficulties documented in literature presents an intertwined pattern of both social and economic challenges. For one, single motherhood has been linked to problems of experienced financial incapacity of the single mother to provide for her family, especially for single mothers who lack formal education and are only able to work under a meager salary. Linked to the extent of a single mother's economic difficulties is her level of educational attainment. Single mothers with higher educational attainment have been less likely to face financial difficulties than single mothers with only secondary education degrees and lower ([Rousou, Koua, Middleton, & Karanikola, 2019](#); [Zhou, McKenzie, Ma, Oishi, & Abe, 2011](#)).

Financial hardships experienced by single mothers as a sole provider of their families translates into negative socioemotional outcomes such as psychological distress and mental illness like depression and anxiety disorders ([Rousou, Koua, Middleton, & Karanikola, 2019](#); [Stack & Meredith, 2017](#)). Specific to the effect of financial hardships to socio emotional outcomes of single mothers is on how financial hardships combined with the social pressures of being viewed as financially insecure and irresponsible, immoral and irreputable, and a bad parent, single mothers suffer from self-perceived notions that their experienced hardship is a natural consequence of their circumstance as single mother. These self-perceived notions towards oneself decrease the likeli-

hood of single mothers seeking assistance and help ([Barone, 2016](#); [DeJean & McGeorge, 2017](#); [Stack & Meredith, 2017](#)).

In the context of Southeast Asia, data on the experiences and circumstances of single mothers are sparse. Nevertheless, available data documenting the circumstances faced by single mothers in Southeast Asia exhibits resemblance with the broader findings of researches on single motherhood. In Brunei Darussalam, where extreme poverty does not exist, relative poverty is defined as a condition when households earn 50 percent less of the average income of the population and are linked to low education, unemployment, and divorces to single parenthood ([Abdullah, 2010](#)). This generally implies that divorced single mothers and single mothers with low educational attainment are more susceptible to relative poverty. The poverty incidence of single mothers is also documented to be high in Cambodia. According to a Social Protection System Review of Cambodia published by the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2017, single parent households, especially those headed by women form a significant portion of Cambodian impoverished households. A more proximate estimate suggests that households headed by women constitute 27 percent of the impoverished households in Cambodia; the likelihood of poverty for households headed by women are higher than their counterpart ([FAO, 2015](#)). This forwards that in Cambodia, single mother families or households are generally economically disadvantaged.

In Indonesia, single mothers are also economically disadvantaged. According to the OECD Development Centre (2019), women in Indonesia are poorer than men and the disadvantages they face are relatively compounding. Further, the IFLS data in 2014 indicate that in Indonesia women were much more likely to be unpaid workers and risked their life in their job ([RAND Institute, 2015](#)). A 2010 research about gender and social protection in Indonesia highlighted that around 115 million of people out of the 220 million population will become poor if a single month's income is lost, which essentially affects the adolescents,

single-headed households (divorced, widowed, or abandoned), and elderly ([Arif, Holmes, Syukri, & Febriany, 2010](#)). The vulnerability of female-headed households from poverty is compounded by lack of specific programs to assist single mothers by the Ministry for Women's Empowerment and the lack of formal recognition of single mothers before the law. Consequent to the lack of formal recognition for female-headed households, single mothers face difficulties accessing financial resources such as bank loans and credit ([Herbst-Debby, 2018](#)) and divorced women have limited legal rights ([Supratman, 2018](#)).

Challenges of similar nature are also apparent among Malaysian single mothers. Bearing resemblance to the difficulties experienced by single mothers in Cambodia and Indonesia, poverty rates among households headed by women in Malaysia is higher compared to households headed by men, with poverty incidence of 2.1 compared to 1.6 of male-headed households in 2012 ([Endut, Azmawati, & Mohd Hashim, 2015](#)). According to Dasimah, Puziah, & Munna ([2009](#)), as cited by the study of Endut, Azmawat, & Hashim (2015), women 40 years and above make up 80 percent of low-income female-households. The UNDP (2020) also confers that single mothers in Malaysia, especially those from rural areas of the country, face financial challenges due to the lack of specialized skills and education necessary for proper employment. Furthermore, other than the additional burden of caring for extended families and the inability to afford childcare, single mothers in the country tend to accept inadequately paid, low-level jobs with work conditions that are unfavorable to them (UNDP, 2020). Many of the single mothers have no other option than to rely on modest government assistance (UNDP, 2020). However, while existing social welfare and protection schemes are available for single mothers in Malaysia, several constraints are apparent in single mothers' availment of those programs. One constraint being that women who are not active in certain community activities are excluded from accessing some programs. This doesn't account the condition that single

mothers' duties such as childcare and work prevents them from getting involved in community activities that are requisites for accessing some of the social protection and welfare services ([Endut, Azmawait, & Mohd Hashim, 2015](#)). Furthermore, the taxing and tedious bureaucratic process and waiting periods has led to pent up frustrations and disappointment of single mothers and has increased their incapability to meet their children's needs ([Abd Hamid & Salleh, 2013](#)). Another constraint is that many single mothers in Malaysia have low education levels leading to little knowledge of channels for financial aids and the needed requirements and process for availing them ([Roddin, Sultan Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed, & Abdul Razzaq, 2010](#)).

In case of Laos, the pattern of economic disadvantage among single mothers is also implicit from the documented experiences of Lao women. A Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR published by The World Bank and Asia Development Bank reveals that in Lao PDR approximately 10 percent of households are female-headed households (14 percent in urban areas and 8.7 in rural areas). Accordingly, female-headed households are generally more impoverished than Male-headed households. Female-headed households make up 8 percent of households in the southern province of Attapeu in Laos, but they are considered poor; in Sekong and Savannkhet female-headed households account for 80 percent of the households in those places were among the poor households ([The World Bank, 2012](#)). Economic difficulties of single mothers is also implicitly evident in Myanmar. A study conducted in rural Myanmar shows that female-headed households own less asset in terms of agriculture than male-headed households, leading to lower comparative income; female household heads are also found to be more likely to illiterate than their male counterparts, and tend to have a greater number of children drop out of primary schools ([Kyaw & Routray, 2006](#)). While in Thailand, single mothers often need support such as income, employment, childcare, maternity leave, social networks, education and training, housing and health care; and, while many

single mothers are part of the active workforce, they are more frequently under informal sector jobs which, despite being flexible, are usually low paying jobs that do not provide social security benefits ([Wiwatwongwana, 2018](#)). In Vietnam, single mothers are also faced with a significant number of challenges pertaining to poverty. A study in 2011 gauging the vulnerability of female-headed households in Vietnam to poverty by exploring consumption, exposure to shocks (force majeure such as natural calamities), severity of shock suffered, reveals that in Vietnam, widows, divorced mothers, and single or unmarried mothers were found to be consumption poorer and more vulnerable to poverty compared to households headed by male and households headed by females with an absent husband ([Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2009](#)).

CHILDCARE OR CHILD SUPPORT POLICIES

For most Southeast Asian countries, the existence of childcare related programs such as daycares or child care subsidies are not present. However, a form of childcare support policies for divorced single mothers is being implemented in Brunei and Thailand. In Brunei, under the Islamic Family Law N. 217 13, a “*nafkah*”, which means the obligatory provision for basic necessities such as food, clothing, and accommodation must be provided to the woman and their children by the former husband ([The Brunei Darussalam, 2012](#)). A similar policy framework is also observed in Thailand for divorced mothers. The legal system in Thailand, as applied to single mothers, can be divided into two distinctions. Under the Private Child Support, the divorced mother’s former husband is required to share the responsibility for raising their children. Meanwhile, on the Public Child Care scheme the state is mandated to intervene and be responsible for providing care for the children from single mother households ([Kokusaigyomu, 2006](#)). Nevertheless, despite the existence of such programs in Thailand, the deficiency in the knowledge and understanding of single mothers in these mechanisms ren-

ders them incapable of accessing their rights as provided by the legislation ([Paitoonpong et al., 2010](#)). Furthermore, in order to gain compensation from their former husbands or the state, divorced single mothers must overcome barriers associated with the stringent legal requirements and procedures associated with their rights ([Namsomboon & Kusakabe, 2011](#)). Aside from the child support system of responsibility sharing for divorced single mothers and their former husbands, another Child support program for poor families jointly implemented by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the Government of Thailand. This Child Support Program provides a grant of 400 baht per month for children up to one year old; the grant was increased to 600 baht per month in March 2016, and expanded to include children up to three years of age ([Sricharatchanya & Brown, 2019](#)).

FINANCIAL AID

Social welfare programs inclusive of single mothers which come in the form of financial aid are being implemented in most countries in Southeast Asia. Countries such as Brunei Malaysia, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam, in particular, provide financial assistance for struggling single mothers. Financial Assistance in the form of micro-grant is being implemented in Brunei, providing monetary support for vulnerable people inclusive of single mothers that have undergone entrepreneurship development training under the Youth Development Centre (YDC) and Darussalam Enterprise (DARe) ([Ministry of Finance, 2020](#)). Under the Social Welfare Department of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community there are a range of small specific Federal programs in Malaysia. The Financial Aid provision depends on the scale of a national poverty line established by the Economic Planning Unit ([Evans, 2011](#)). The criteria for the status of poor are derived from the per capita household income which are, in Peninsular Malaysia is 830 Malaysian Ringgit, in Sabah is 1090 Malaysian Ringgit, and in Sarawak is 920 Malaysian Ringgit. The goal

of the provision of financial assistance are to complement income in order to fulfill day-to-day needs, raise the standard of living and as enhancement allowance for the targeted beneficiaries which include single mothers, in order to help them achieve employment and assist them with reducing their financial hardship for a period of time in order for them to achieve financial independence ([Jamaluddin & Hanafiah, 2018](#)). Concurrently, in the fledgling country of Timor, a Conditional Cash Transfer Program. In the fledgling country of Timor-Leste, a conditional cash transfer program is being jointly administered by the United Nations Development Programme and the country's Ministry of Social Solidarity, for the purpose of ending intergenerational poverty and protection of the vulnerable through the encouragement of families in improving their level of education and economic situations ([United Nations, 2010](#)).

Meanwhile, Social Protection for single mothers in Vietnam is available pursuant under the Decree No. 67/2007/ND-CP, also known as the "Decree on support policies for social protection beneficiaries" established in April 2007 ([ECOI, 2014](#)). Under this decree single mothers raising child(ren) under 16 years of age, alongside orphan and abandoned children, Old people, seriously disabled people, people with mental illness, HIV-AIDS infected people, families and individual adopting orphans, and households taking care of two or more disabled people, are all subject to social assistance. Single mothers receive 180,000 Vietnamese Dong as monthly allowance until their children reach the age of 18, under the condition that their child(ren) is(are) following general education or vocational training. Aside from single mothers' monthly allowance, their children are also entitled to the following: 1.) Persons who are pursuing general education or vocational training are entitled to exemption or reduction of school fees and free textbooks, notebooks and learning equipment according to law; 2.) an allowance of VND 2,000,000 per person as support for burial costs when they die (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2007).

VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

Employment assistance initiatives such as Vocational Training Programs is the most commonly observed social protection program aimed at single mothers and women in general among Southeast Asian countries. More specifically, Vocational Training Programs are being implemented in Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Myanmar. In Brunei, vocational training program focusing on developing the entrepreneurial skill and accounting know-hows of single mothers is being implemented under the Business Empowerment Program (BIBDSEED), a program jointly set up by the Bank Islam Darussalam, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Ministry of Culture Youth and Sport (MCYS) ([The Bruneian, 2019](#)). The BIBDSEED is a 15-month program consisting of 4 phases, providing continuous monitoring and coaching from representatives in related industries including training facilitators. Out of the 93 participants between the years 2018-2019, around ten percent of the 1st and 2nd cycle participants have successfully established their own businesses ([Ministry of Finance, 2020](#)). In Cambodia, the former National Social Protection Policy (NSPS) (2011-2015) and the current National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) (2016-2025) contains all the social programs under the Cambodian Government. While initially, under the NSPS, financial assistance and psycho-social counseling were provided for identified vulnerable groups which include single mothers, under the NSPPF, only vocational training programs - trainings on entrepreneurship - are available not specifically for single mothers, but for women and female employees in general ([Royal Government of Cambodia, 2011, 2016](#)).

A vocational training program is also being implemented in Malaysia to assist single mothers. The Single Mother Skills Incubator Program (I-KIT) introduced in the 9th Malaysian Plan focuses on developing seven skill areas: handicraft, tourism, beauty therapy, business, entrepreneurship and childcare ([Roddin, Sultan Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed, Abdul Razzaq, 2010](#)). Finally, in

Myanmar, under the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement, The Department of Social Welfare carries out preventive, protective, and rehabilitative measures of social welfare services for the socially disadvantaged targeting Children, Youth, Women, Disable Persons, and Aged group ([Ministry of Social Welfare Relief & Resettlement, 2019](#)). The Department of Social Welfare provides Vocational Training on sewing, embroidery, knitting, Macaroni, and Tatting ([Department of Social Welfare, 2020](#)). Vocational training centers and women development centers serving about 1000 vulnerable women are present in 6 centers across Yangon, Mandalay, Myeik, and Kyaingtone ([The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014](#)).

OTHER SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICIES

Social Protection Programs in the form of housing support for single mothers is being implemented in Singapore. "It is documented by Glendinning, Smith & Kadir ([2015](#)) for divorced and widowed single mothers taking care of at minimum one child below the age 18 have the eligibility for the Assistance Scheme for Second-Timers (ASSIST) focusing on allowing a smooth housing transition after divorce by providing 2-room and 3-room flats in non-mature estates; subsidized flat may also be provided for divorced person on the condition that eligibility requirements are fulfilled". Singapore also provides the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS) for divorced or widowed mothers who's application for a Build To Order (BTO) flat is on queue for completion without availability of other housing option; divorced or widowed single mother including their children may rent a flat for not more than 3 years, until their BTO flat is completed ([Glendinning, Smith, & Kadir, 2015](#)).

IMPACT OF SOCIAL WELFARE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR SINGLE MOTHERS

Among the 10 southeast Asian countries studies, a general lack of data and documentation on southeast Asian single moth-

ers' experience is evident. In order to supplement this, the research will derive implications on the possible impacts of specific social welfare policies and programs studied outside the region. The most commonly found barriers to achieving a desirable socio-economic condition among single mothers are the general lack of skills and low level of education, as well as the absence of accessible childcare services ([Crawford, 2006](#); [Roddin, Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed, & Abdul Razzaq, 2010](#); [Zhou, McKenzie, Ma, Oishi, & Abe, 2011](#); [Glendinning, Smith, & Kadir, 2015](#); [DeJean & McGeorge, 2017](#); [Stack & Meredith, 2017](#); [Walsh, Tanoue, & deBlois, 2018](#); [Rousou, Koua, Middleton, & Karanikola, 2019](#); & [UNDP, 2020](#)). Researches on the effect of childcare on the economic condition of single mothers exhibit a pattern of higher likelihood for positive outcome. This is due in part to finding childcare services being a major concern for single mothers, thus making it a significant hurdle in employment and achieving economic independence ([Crawford, 2006](#); [Zhou, McKenzie, Ma, Oishi, & Abe, 2011](#); [Walsh, Tanoue, & Deblois, 2018](#)). "A study by Crawford ([2006](#)) utilizing the National Survey of American Families (NSAF) data on the impact of childcare subsidies on single mothers' work effort shows a higher likelihood of full-time employment for single mothers who received childcare subsidies". More specifically, recipients of childcare subsidies worked 9.4 more hours per week on average compared to non-recipient single mothers ([Crawford, 2006](#)).

On the other hand, Vocational training programs are cited as relatively effective in producing positive outcomes in terms of employment for single mothers. For instance, in Japan, single mothers with vocational capacity in nursing, teaching, or book-keeping qualifications possess higher likelihood of being employed; the tendency of acquiring higher wages are much higher for those that bear qualifications in nursing, cooking, and barber/beautician ([hou, McKenzie, Ma, Oishi, & Abe, 2011](#)). However, vocational training programs should also be market demand sensitive for it to be effective, as vocational training programs

aiming at simply providing single mothers with professional capacity only towards minimum wage tends to do little to improve their overall economic condition ([Cobb-Clark, Dahman, Salamanca, & Zhu, 2017](#)). A combination of childcare support and vocational training programs is a more promising approach towards improving socio-economic outcomes of single mothers. As explained by Walsh, Tanoue, and de Blois ([2018](#)), a Two-generation program which provides access to workforce development for parents and a high-quality childcare for young children, possess strong theoretical underpinnings that support long term economic gains for families and communities. Moreover, an early assessment of such program in Minneapolis which integrate multiple pronged support for career-track education, high quality early childhood education, and safe affordable housing was found to have a return on investment to society of \$2.47 per every dollar spent ([Walsh, Tanoue, and deBlois, 2018](#)).

Single mothers in countries like Indonesia and Laos continue to experience inequalities and challenges such as poor socio-economic conditions and psychological distress as a result of the lack of social protection policies available to them. Due to the lack of specific programs under the Ministry of Women's Empowerment, difficulties of accessing banking loans and credit, and the limited legal rights of single mothers in Indonesia, they may continue to face poor socio-economic conditions and psychological distress ([Supartman, 2018](#); [Herbst-Debby, 2018](#)). The same could also be said in Laos, as social protection such as regular and predictable cash transfers in Laos are mostly centered around dependents and retirees from the category of civil servants, the military and the police; with only free maternal, neonatal, and child services available services for women ([SPSL, 2015](#)).

CONCLUSION

The struggles and challenges Southeast Asian Single mothers confront are rarely documented. Nevertheless, available data of

the experiences and conditions of single mothers in the region posits similar findings with the various studies of single mothers outside Southeast Asia. It is implicit from the data available for female-headed households in the region that single mothers and single mother households in Southeast Asia are relatively poorer compared to two-parent households or male-headed households. Single mothers generally lack vocational skills and possess low-level education. It can be inferred from broad findings on researches about the experiences of single mothers that single mothers in Southeast Asia are also experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, and depression caused by their poor socioeconomic condition. This can reinforce their perception of single motherhood as a naturally disadvantageous status.

Throughout the ten Southeast Asian Countries studied, an emerging pattern of similarity in terms of social protection and welfare policies is apparent in most of these countries. For instance, Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Myanmar implement vocational training programs mostly centered around building entrepreneurship capacity. In particular, Cambodia and Myanmar share a similar social protection policy structure where social protection programs are based through a life cycle starting from pregnancy and early childhood to old age. There are no vocational training programs targeting single mothers, specifically in Cambodia and Myanmar, as vocational training programs in these countries are available for women in general. Concurrently, while Brunei and Malaysia implement vocational training programs identically targeting single mothers specifically. Financial aid programs for single mothers are also one of the most commonly observed social protection and welfare programs in the region and are being implemented in Brunei, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Childcare or Child support policies are in place only in Brunei and Thailand, while Housing programs are unique to Singapore. Two countries in the region, in particular, Indonesia and Laos, continue to lack specific social protection and welfare programs for single mothers. Among the countries studied

in this article, Brunei remains to be the country with well-developed social protection and welfare programs for single mothers, incorporating financial assistance through micro-grants, vocational training programs, and child support mechanisms for divorced mothers. Identified barriers toward accessing social protection and welfare programs for single mothers include lack of knowledge or awareness of the mechanism and requirements in accessing such programs and the tedious bureaucratic processes involved in accessing such programs.

Existing studies on the impacts of social protection and welfare programs showed that accessible child-care support programs could bode positive socioeconomic outcomes as it addresses the problem of single mothers in accessing childcare services as one of the barriers towards a better socioeconomic condition. Similarly, vocational training programs which are market demand sensitive and develop single mothers' professional capacity allow them to be employed in jobs that offer a higher likelihood towards career development and advancement. Overall, a two-pronged approach that incorporates accessible childcare services and vocational training programs could provide more promising outcomes for single mothers. Therefore, a need to expand social protection and welfare programs for single mothers in Southeast Asia, incorporating emphasis on accessible childcare support programs and vocational or professional capacity training programs, is needed.

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