

Journal of  
**Economic and Social Thought**

econsciences.com

Volume 10

March-June 2023

Issue 1-2

**Female single parenthood, poverty and  
livelihoods strategies in rural area:  
Evidence from Cameroon**

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**Abstract.** In Sub-Saharan Africa, female single-parent families of rural areas face many difficulties in their daily lives. This article analyses the determinants of single parenthood and the livelihoods strategies of single parents facing poverty in the Abang and Longo localities, located in the Nanga-Eboko Sub-division, in Cameroon. The observation of these populations and the analysis carried with the semi-structured interview method in 2021 reveal that these single-parent families suffer from poverty, due to their vulnerable situation. In response to this, in order to meet their basic needs, they develop livelihoods strategies based on family solidarity, social support and small income-generating activities, mainly in the informal sector of the local economy.

**Keywords.** Single parenthood; Poverty; Livelihoods strategies; Cameroon, Daily life.

**JEL.** A13; D10; Z10.

## 1. Introduction

The poverty of female-headed households is a common social phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa. This situation is a matter of concern that for researchers and decision makers in the field of family promotion. It leads to questions about livelihoods strategies developed by single mothers to meet the most basic needs of their families, particularly in rural areas where this phenomenon seems to be more prevalent. This article analyses the determinants of female single parenthood and identifies its livelihoods strategies in the face of prevailing poverty, by observing facts in Nanga-Eboko, a peri-urban area in Cameroon. In fact, Cameroon, a Sub-Saharan African country in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), is classified by the World Bank as a lower middle-income developing country. More than half of the population lives below the poverty threshold, that is with less than two dollars a day. This raging poverty is even more notable in rural areas than in cities. In this context, poverty does not spare these single-parent families, that are families with only one parent, where the unique family head is either a man or a woman entirely responsible for children.

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Thus, through direct observation, over a period of about 10 years in the Centre region of Cameroon, we have detected a precariousness that calls for in-depth reflection, likely to lead to effective solutions. Indeed, the care of children by single parents represents a major challenge for the very survival of these families, which are the pillars of the transmission of values for the stability of the whole society. To this end, if successfully raising children is a major objective and even a challenge for families (Décaux, 2009), this objective becomes even more challenging in single-parent families. Thus, single parents, recognized as autonomous individuals, invent and reinvent themselves when it comes to meeting their children's needs and investing in them. It is worth remembering that their children are a stimulus for them, and work is a wide range of activities in terms of their ambitions, values and resources. In this regard, single parenthood refers to the condition of a parent who lives without a spouse in housing with one or more dependent children.

This situation can be due to several factors resulting from a personal choice or from constraining situations. A distinction is thus made between chosen or voluntary single parenthood and involuntary single parenthood. The study on the structuring of single-parent households will enable to present the actors involved, the course of the phenomenon resulting from the underlying considerations and the livelihoods.

Various elements contribute to building single-parent households, notably the age at the first pregnancy, the extended duration of celibacy, informal unions, experience/time, the perseverance of single parents and sociability networks. Expressed and studied in Africa under the concept of "head of the household", the rate of female heads of households rose in Cameroon, from 77% in 1987, the date of the first census, to 80% in 2004 (Tichit & Robette, 2008, pp.44-45). Indeed, according to Tichit (1994), single parenthood is primarily female given that in Cameroon, there are 70% of female-headed households, compared to 30% of their male counterparts. These data show that the single-parent tendency is more widespread among women than men.

Poverty among single-parent families in Africa in general, and in Cameroon in particular, is quite complex and calls out all social actors, especially communities (children, women, men) and policy-makers. Social issues surrounding this concern are both vast and complex, because they are linked to difficulties in managing the family unit, infant delinquency, precariousness and poverty of single parents. Generally considered to be deviant, these families are stigmatized and this situation leads shortcomings in terms of childcare (Mucchielli, 2001).

It is therefore important to analyse how single parents organize themselves to ensure the survival of their families with regard to family responsibilities they have to assume. The methodology used is based on the analysis of sociological phenomena relying on facts observation through semi-directive interviews with single-parent families in Abang and Longo, two rural localities located in the Nanga-Eboko district, in Cameroon. This analysis is complemented by a documentary review on single parenthood theories. The study is conducted from 2020 to 2021. The remainder of the article is structured around the literature review (2), the methodology (3), the results of the analysis and discussions (4).

## 2. Literature review

Single parenthood, in general, is widely documented. In terms of theory, the study of the family emerged from the 1920s as a result of the influence of the American sociologists of the Chicago interactionist school through the conduct of numerous studies on the family (Pilon, 2003). Family sociology thus became the subject of a scientific approach in the second half of the 19th century, with the works of Morgan (1871), Engels (1884) and Bachofen (1861). They perceive the family as a historical social institution whose structure and role are determined by the global level of development of society. Family, then, is perceived both as a historical phenomenon and as a total social fact, which has undergone significant changes over time, moving from the gift economy to the market economy, according to Mauss (1924). Research in the Medieval West has disproved the idea of a linear evolution of families. Similarly, demographic studies have helped to invalidate the myth of the extended family and the nuclear family as the universal family forms. But other family forms have emerged, for instance single-parent families.

Thus, single parenthood is primarily perceived as a family model resulting from the social consequences of economic crises, wars and violence that are deeply affecting the world (Bisilliat, 1996). Single parenthood thus generates more poverty among women than men. Family breakdown also appears to be one of the main causes of single parenthood, fostering precarious situations, especially among women with neither education nor human nor economic capital (Segalen, 2008). These causes show the complexity of single-parent families by going beyond the category of widows, which was formerly the main factor in single parenthood according to Pilon *et al.* (1997) and Ducourau (2008). However, Algava *et al.* (2005) and Letablier (2011) analyse the living conditions of single-parent families, and conclude that parents from these families (who are mostly women) as more active parents than those living in couples. These single parents, according to these authors, encounter specific problems regarding childcare and balance between family and professional life.

In Europe, the beginning of the 1960s was characterized by a spectacular rise in female employment, while male employment was stagnant or declining. This means that unemployment and shortage periods led to the massive entry of women into the labour market (Paugam, 1996). Women's contribution to the productive system and to monetary income overturns the traditions that limited the role of women to that of a wife and mother. Today, women are more involved in the production of wealth, which disrupts existing norms (Bikoi Bi, 2014).

In Africa in general, and in Cameroon in particular, the practice of heads of households has been carried out through the levirate, which has long been considered as an effective means of developing single-parent households. The phenomenon began to intensify in the cities through the practice of "matrifocal families" to borrow the terms of Clignet quoted by Tichit (2002). These matrifocal families are due to women's refusal to join the levirate and their desire to become autonomous. The introduction of women into the economic fabric has completely changed the shape and structure of families. The new family setups result from the dynamism of Cameroonian family structures (Segalen, 2008). The family phenomenon, like any other, is

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permanently changing one, and the responsibility for the care of children no longer lies solely with the mother.

Moreover, the diversification of family models in Cameroon has been remarkable since the 90s. This evolution has been remarkable in both urban and rural areas. The single-parent phenomenon began to be studied from the perspective of 'parenthood', with the aim of highlighting the responsibility of each parent within the family with regard to procreation, education and care (Letablier, 2011). Therefore, according to Tichit (2002), ethnography has been the subject of research on family in Africa. This is where the concepts of "Heads of families" were developed, together with the gender concept in the development policies discussed at the Beijing Conference in 1995.

Thus, African societies, far from being static in the family domain, have been confronted with events that have contributed to dynamizing families (Pilon, 2003). This is the result of several factors, notably colonization, urbanization, monetization, the development of the wage economy and more recently the economic crisis, the increase in armed conflicts and the AIDS epidemic.

Given that Beti society<sup>1</sup> is fairly permissive in terms of sexual intercourse and that sex is not a taboo (Vincent, 1976), local customs governing sexuality out of marriage are factors increasing the number of single-parent households. Actually, this sexual freedom, inherent to their existence, is the outcome of a set-up of free unions where the actors freely decide to couple and also decide at a given moment to separate. Concubinage, also referred to by Durkheim (1893) as 'instinctive union', differs from a regulated relationship where the actors involved are under no mutual obligation. This broad freedom of the actors involved creates marital conflicts and consequently the break-up of couples. In this context, everyone acts according to his own interests and aspirations.

However, in the face of the major challenges they face, single mothers do not remain inert, but invest themselves in the balance of their households. This statement was supported by the theories used, in particular the theory of daily life, which, through the described historicity, allowed us to analyse the rationality of single parents and the implementation of their practical actions. On the other hand, strategic analysis was important to us because of the opportunities that single parents have and the analysis of the strategies they develop to maintain their families and to escape the vicious circle of difficulties or "unintended consequences" they face daily. The theory of strategic analysis enabled us to show how single parents have the skills and resources to adapt their families. Finally, the theory of social dynamics allows us to better understand the evolution of the family institution in permanent mutation and its changing aspects. In other words, "traditional" families are becoming "modern" families: this leads to the rise of single-parent families.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology used is based on a documentary review, individual semi-structured interviews and direct observation. The socio-historical background of single parents was documented using the biographical data collection method, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with single parents. This approach was effective in bringing out the survival

<sup>1</sup>It is a large ethnic group found in the Central, Southern and Eastern Regions of Cameroon.

strategy used by these families. Direct observation provided information on the combined family activities carried out to meet primary needs and the means used for this purpose. The collected information was analysed. However, data were sometimes processed from a quantitative point of view.

Field data were collected from September 2020 to January 2021, with 24 and 6 single women and men living in the Nanga-Eboko sub-division. The aim is to identify the livelihoods strategies of single-parent families through the diversity of its factors and dominant models. Given the nature of the study, based on semi-structured interviews, sampling in this study did not necessarily have to be conducted as in a purely statistical approach. Moreover, sampling is targeted because certain categories of people allowed us to have some information on our subject of research. We ensured that the study sample was diversified according to age, gender, professional status and educational levels. Thus, single parents who lived only with their children and who, at other times, did or did not live with their partner were interviewed.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Mainly caused by widowhood for a long time, single parenthood is caused in the studied area by various factors, with significant specificities regarding female single parenthood, which is considered as the most widespread.

##### 4.1. Characteristics of female single parenthood in Nanga-Eboko

In this locality, single parenthood results from socio-cultural factors such as age, infidelity, customs and psychological factors such as social pressure and the desire for professional integration.

###### 4.1.1. Age and social pressure

Results from the field data analysis indicate that the age at the first pregnancy of single women ranges from 14 to 20 years old. After child birth, most women live together with their partners. And several years after, they are either abandoned or victims of the irresponsibility and infidelity of their partners. In addition, there are also marital violence. Thus, most of the interviewed parents are young. This situation aligns with the results of the 1987 census indicating that women heads of households are young (35 years old on average and mostly single 51%). Single mothers in the Centre therefore move from early childbirth to cohabitation and then break up. A 29-year-old single mother of three children, for instance, after experiencing cohabitation with her partner, decided to break up with him because she was a victim of domestic violence.

In Africa in general, and in Cameroon in particular, marriage is recognized as a crucial step in a woman's life (Rahou, 2015). Indeed, for women, remaining single at a certain age creates both individual and family pressure, leading to preference for having a child, if marriage delays. Research carried out in Botswana in 2013 by Deutche (2013), for example, highlights that families in Africa urge women to have children when they are in their twenties and men in their thirties. This practice was confirmed by some of the interviewed single parents, who made the commitment to have children by choice or by force, seeking to fit into society and earn respect. This was the case of a single mother, civil servant, who was interviewed.

“I gave birth to my first child at 34 because of my unstable situation, that is, no marriage, no fixed income. At some point, you realize that jobs

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don't come along and you get older, so you decide to have a child. And the man I was with seemed serious and responsible, so I thought that if my children were like him, it would be perfect. It was therefore after the birth of my first daughters that I got my job," (source: our findings).

This point of view is all the more relevant as having a child in the African society and especially among the populations of the Centre Region in Cameroon, gives honour or respect to the parents and is above all a fertility test according to the traditional society. On the other hand, childless celibacy at a certain age is not a desired situation in traditional African society. This finding confirms Kenyatta's view, reported by Atsatito (2003), that: "*Procreation is an obligation: sexual intercourse is not the sole satisfaction of a selfish pleasure but a social duty.*" According to some of our respondents, namely a 36-year-old single mother, at a certain age, the need to give birth becomes an obligation for her. This is justified by the following statement:

"I have five children today, I started making kids when I was very young and today they are grown up, many people say that they are not my children and I like that."

Thus, women who undertake to have children, regardless of the presence of their partners, contribute to the spread of single-parent families. All the above-mentioned factors related to the micro and macro-sociological approaches highlight the dominant patterns of single parenthood.

### 4.1.2. Infidelity

Infidelity and irresponsibility in some men are always contributing factors to the break-up of couples. One of our respondents, Catherine, aged 36, does not accept this and chooses to live alone. Thus, concubinage studied in this context refers to a society governed by what Durkheim (1893) called "*facts of nature*", where the actors have no moral or legal obligation of family responsibilities. However, single men blame women for lack of education for marriage, sexual vagrancy and idleness. This is highlighted by Nelson, a 40-year-old father of four children, who believes that:

"Women today are annoying, when I leave her at home, as I am constantly travelling for work, when I come back I find that she is out for a walk, leaving the hungry children at home and coming home very late at night. Besides, she always disvalues money for food ration that I give her and she does not eat a meal 3 times, she prefers to go to someone who gives her more money and she leaves my children like that".

Thus, infidelity is not visible only on one side in these communities. It is practised both by men and women. Indeed, studies (Deutche, 2013) that were carried out in Botswana in 2013 highlighted significant reasons underpinning this phenomenon. These studies revealed that in Africa, families induce women to have children when they are in their twenties and men in their thirties. In this case, a woman is more likely to find a husband after proving her fertility, even though the bride price will be reduced. The document points out that motherhood is a way of satisfying emotional desires and, furthermore, some women may decide to become pregnant and then will claim coincidence.

### 4.1.3. Customs

It is important to note that among the populations of the Haute-Sanaga division in Cameroon, and particularly of Nanga-Eboko, customs are based on the traditional patriarchal system, which is generally unfavourable to women's empowerment promotion. As a matter of fact, according to Bikoi Bi (2014), the social representations of the role of men and women continue to uphold inequalities at the expense of women. Moreover, the transition from the

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“traditional” family to the “modern” family of the 1970s in Europe can be explained by marital instability, the decrease in fertility, and the re-establishing of social and family ties forged in an industrialization context. This is due to the new economic realities (Segalen, 2008). Thus, the multiple social changes resulting from periods of crisis and unemployment have led to changes in family life.

Concubinage, commonly known as “*cam we stay*”, which results from financial difficulties or a crisis period, is a significant phenomenon in Cameroon today. According to several women interviewed, they first cohabited with their partners because of care needs, and then separated from them after spending several years in concubinage. These years can vary from 2 to 7 years. The establishment of cohabitation has disrupted traditional norms and values, as we are witnessing the spread of sexual freedom (Mendras, 1996). According to the interviewees and our observation in the field, the practice of “*cam we stay*” is a determining factor in the increasing number of single-parent households, as the actors involved have a considerable freedom and are characterized by the search for individual interests. This is because one of the partners may decide to get back together after spending several years with the other for individual reasons.

### 4.1.4. *Desire for socio-economic integration*

The high level of education of women and their professional integration have deeply changed social roles, gender and the duration of the single parenthood period. Financial independence is often the root cause of imbalances in gender relations. Women's earnings influence the social and economic decision-making process. This process enables women to take control of their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society at the international, local and personal levels (UIE5, 1995). Financial empowerment has increased when structural adjustment programmes have been implemented in many developing countries. This independence gives women the desire to become more assertive and to make decisions within the family unit. The extended period of single parenthood observed among the women interviewed is a result of their earnings power, as one single mother said:

“I don't want to be with a spouse who prevents me from working and is only there to eat my money. Today, I do not expect anything from anyone, not even the instruction to do nothing, because the money I work now allows me to take care of my family”.

Studies conducted in Benin in 2005 reveal that single women, heads of households are very unlikely to live alone, because of marital status effects, while widows are much more likely to form a single household. This finding is contradictory to the data obtained in the field in the study area. However, in terms of employment status, there are more female traders who are more independent and often voluntarily aspire to live alone (Mouhamadou, 2005, p.150). Also, very few women aged between 20 and 49 live alone, while women with a higher level of education live alone less frequently. On the other hand, our findings do not corroborate this result. Instead, the majority of single mothers are between 24 and 60 years of age. With regard to the level of education and socio-professional activity of the surveyed women, the analysis reveals that single parenthood is more widespread among women in the informal sector and with a lower level of education. Most of them gave birth early when they were still pupils. Single parenthood is therefore more likely to

occur among less educated women, most of whom are engaged in informal self-employment. Thus, family structures are neither identical nor static across the continent.

As a result of the increasing desire for a career, there is an emerging category of women whose level of education does not limit them to simply being wives and mothers (Pilon *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, men, who used to be the main providers are increasingly influenced by women, who are now massively involved in the productive sector. Their financial independence has therefore had an impact not only on representations of family configurations, but also on local customs, which have undergone real changes in recent years.

### **4.2. Female single parenthood patterns of poverty in Nanga-Eboko**

Poverty is permanent in the two (2) main models of female single parenthood in the locality surveyed: chosen female single parenthood and involuntary female single parenthood.

#### *4.2.1. Chosen single parenthood among women*

Chosen or desired single parenthood reflects a plural reality. Firstly, it includes women who had a child accidentally, from the beginning, and who subsequently decide to keep having them. For Rahou (2015, p.134), single parenthood represents a particular pathway, with the common goal of keeping and raising children, despite the daily difficulties of life. This is the case of Aline, a 26-year-old single mother who had her first child accidentally at the age of 17, and who subsequently decided to continue having children, either with the same spouse or not.

The second category is made up of women who decided to have a child after their professional integration. They perceive children as a responsibility that requires a source of income and a whole range of planning for their care. In this regard, Letablier (2011) had already pointed out that single women are not always abandoned, but they can always choose this way of life. Most women in this situation are engaged in the formal sector activities. This analysis emerges from the words of one of our respondents, aged 36, who said:

“I said that I would not have children without a job. I had my first child at 35 years old. The money I receive at the end of the month allows me to entirely take care of his needs.

In both cases, they are women who were not influenced by the simple desire to give birth to a child, without having the means to raise the child. They proudly assume this courageous choice. It is the case Corine, a 40-year-old single mother, who thinks that:

“The commitment to have a child should be planned, because you don't have a child for someone else, but for yourself. And therefore, the family expenses that single mothers have to bear should be considered as an inherent part of their existence, because the child is their reason for living.

#### *4.2.2. Involuntary female single parenthood*

Involuntary single parenthood situations suffered by women are generally explained by the death of a spouse, the abandonment of a spouse or false promises of marriage. Generally, abandoning a child occurs after the birth of a child (or as soon as it is conceived), the irresponsible spouse decides to leave for economic reasons or to rebuild the family. Here is the situation experienced by a single mother interviewed:



"I was living with a man, when I got pregnant and when he knew about it, at first he started to help me, but then he left, his phone number was no longer going through. I struggled to raise the child alone and fortunately I was living in a family home. It was only afterwards, when the child was already old enough to go to school, that I had to go back and settle here in the village, because in the city the child's school is more expensive and so is the food. I preferred to go back and find a small job and farm."

It is true that cases of abandonment are mixed, but it is important to remind ourselves that women are the main victims. In the event of involuntary single parenthood, following a false promise of marriage, women who are affected generally think that: "Not everyone is cut out for marriage." They resign themselves to this situation, which they in the end take on proudly, while recognizing that a child is "a precious gift from God". In this vein, Glikeau (2014) had already pointed out that women become single parent today by different means Either they have decided to have a child, or they have not found the right partner, or they come out of an unhappy union. However, field data reveal that those who deliberately decide to have children without being married are, most often, women in the public service, whose obtaining a decent job precedes the birth of a child. This would not necessarily mean that they have opted for single parenthood, even if a minority of them do so.

Single parenthood is therefore no longer just the result of the rational choice of actors to achieve their objectives (Atsatito, 2003). It also results from social pressure. On the other hand, others see in this phenomenon the determining factors of destiny. On the other hand, others see in this phenomenon the determining factors of destiny. The words of one of our respondents shed some light on this.

"I met a man, he said we were going to get married... While we were dating, I was sure we were already engaged, but I didn't know he had something else in mind. I got pregnant with my second child. I had my first one in high school when I was 18. But when I met this man, I thought we would get married. We spent some time together and he left. I met another one again, and he did the same. I told myself that I was not cut out for marriage because you can't force your destiny".

Figure 1 below shows the patterns of single parenthood in Nanga-Eboko rural area.

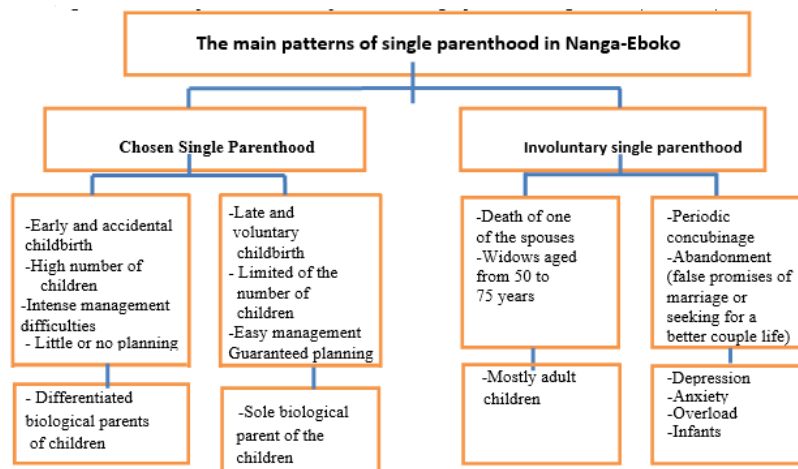


Figure 1. Dominant pattern from the experiences of single parents in Nanga-Eboko (Cameroon)

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### 4.2.3. *Female single-parent poverty in Nanga-Eboko*

Single-parent poverty among women in Nanga-Eboko is perceptible through the precariousness and difficulties in meeting the basic needs of the family (food, housing, clothing, schooling for children, support for elderly parents, etc.). Concerning the living conditions of these single parents, they are marked by the cumulation of activities which does not give them a moment to think about their own future or to carry out their normal occupations. Some single mothers may then turn to prostitution. At this point, some children may be abandoned due to dire poverty. Thus, Guedami & Oucheghrouchen (2015) state that these women abandon their children because of social rejection.

In single-parent families, there can be found the characteristics that expose them, more than others, and the risks of poverty and precariousness (Efigip, 2011). Faced with these difficulties, single parents often invest heavily in the fulfilment of their families. They then build a model of a possible or impossible couple, according to Blanc (1990). Moreover, children appear to be privileged co-residents of single-parent households where they play an important role as the workforce, especially with regard to commercial activities and field work. In this respect, single parenthood becomes the cause of lower levels of education among children (Kauffeisen, 2009).

### 4.3. **Livelihoods strategies of single-parent families in Nanga-Eboko**

The satisfaction of family burdens (nutrition, housing, health, clothing and education) in the Nanga-Eboko area is the result of originality and creativity that are developed around African family solidarity, social solidarity and the exercise of small income-generating activities, often in the informal sector.

#### 4.3.1- *African family solidarity*

Family solidarity refers to “particular forms of social practices such as the transfer of goods, services and people between members of a lineage, whose main function is primarily social, but certain aspects of which can be considered from the point of view of economic interests of the various protagonists” (Adjamagbo, 1997).

Single parents participate in a set of solidarity acts to meet the challenge of satisfying family burdens. According to Bourdieu (1979), these social resources, referred to as “social capital”, are made up of the African family, which is generally large, friends or colleagues, lovers and the neighbourhood. Single parents participate in a set of solidarity acts to meet the challenge of satisfying family burdens. In the survey area, this solidarity is characterized by money or food transfers, or even tips to alleviate daily difficulties. Single parents thus benefit from the help of their family members in the event of childbirth, babysitting, cooking or contribution with foodstuffs. Indeed, some single men often call on their sisters to manage their household and childcare. Others prefer to send their children to their parents' place and take care of all their needs remotely. In contrast, most female single parents live with their children.

For them, the family is an important survival capital. It is rightly pointed out by Lesthaeghe (1989) and Adjamagbo (1997) that nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the family, through the solidarity games, has not only a function of wealth retribution, but also a role of sharing the burdens of a large number of descendants. On the other hand, family solidarity, which is considered as a

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network of relatives, is not necessarily exclusive to family ties, but also to social ties (Decaux, 1996, p.531). This means that the family issue is closely linked to the social one.

### 4.3.2- Social solidarity

Social solidarity refers to a group of neighbours, friends, acquaintances or lovers, who also play a determining role in the functioning of single-parent families. There is a moral link between an individual and the group (or community) to which he or she belongs, so that members feel and express solidarity with each other, leading to a true “collective consciousness” (Durkheim, 1893). The analysis shows that in Nanga-Eboko, single-parent families benefit from survival social security, because a child is a precious asset for the community and deserves to be supported by all, especially in difficult situations due to the precariousness of single parents. This result confirms those obtained from surveys carried out in the Fontsa Toula village in West Cameroon, where women reveal that the child is used in social relationships to obtain privileges or social assets (Atsatito, 2003). Single women's solidarity is reflected in assistance from a variety of sources, including neighbours and their current partner. They benefit from a set of ideological resources, practices or family management techniques. These resources include babysitting in the event of the parent's absence, advice given and material or financial loans.

According to Weber (2019), a reciprocal and mutual fraternity is thus forged at this level. In this respect, single mothers are particularly interactive in society in achieving their goal. Colleagues, on the other hand, are also a great source of advice for single mothers on management strategies. Partners are mostly present to alleviate the loneliness of single mothers, in addition to the money transfers they make, even if not regularly. They develop relationships without cohabitation, in order to satisfy their need for companionship and sometimes for a balanced education for their children. According to Mimché (2007), sociability networks are indeed strategies for mitigating family burdens.

### 4.3.3. Income-generating activity

The results of our analysis reveal that single mothers do not only benefit from external contributions, but also contribute, to a large extent, to the fight against poverty thanks to the financial resources generated by the income-generating activities they carry out (often in the informal sector of the economy) or the paid jobs they can obtain (quite rarely) in the formal sector. It also appears that women working in the informal sector are mostly traders. Small-scale trade enables them to make small profits necessary to meet (at least partially) the essential needs for their livelihood. According to Adjagbo (1997), indeed women's participation in household income, through small-scale trade, is a pre-crisis activity. It shows that, during periods of deteriorating living conditions, this contribution increases significantly, perhaps even extending its role beyond simply ensuring food security for the household.

This result confirms the findings of Ceped No. 15 studies, quoted by Pilon *et al.* (1997), which indicate that in Cameroon and in urban areas in particular, three quarters of the female heads of households surveyed are employed. A great majority of them (two thirds) carry out an independent and generally informal commercial activity. They trade in foodstuffs or work in the service sector (public secretaries, hairdressers, maids, etc.). The others are civil

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servants or similar, and are often employed in teaching, administration, and health and legal professions (Pilon *et al.*, 1997). Thus, there is a massive resort to the informal sector, and more particularly to commercial activities. This might be due to the employment crisis in Cameroon and the lack of skills among women.

Furthermore, there is a professional disparity among single parents, especially women. This is due to the fact that most women in the informal sector were at once burdened by family responsibilities. Consequently, these women have decided to start a small business that can overcome the difficulties they face. The informal sector thus appears as an element of household propagation, as it integrates various strategies for allocating workforce and acquiring household income (Coquery-V, 1989). Moreover, women's strong involvement in the labour market is the result of economic insecurity given that they are the sole provider of income in the household (Paugam, 1996). The provision of income-generating activities, whether informal or formal, enables the family to meet its needs. The income received also allows some single parents to save, to solve particular problems and to plan the family's activities. Women are forced to join rotating savings and credit associations in an attempt to manage their income rationally. The table below summarizes the multiple interactions of single parents in Nanga-Eboko.

**Table 1.** *Livelihoods strategies of female single parents in Nanga-Eboko (Cameroon)*

Themes	Livelihoods strategies	Attendees
1- Family solidarity	- Family accommodation - Babysitting by sisters; - Food and money transfer; - Giving advice.	-Marthe, Michelle, Jeanne -Corine, André, Nelson, Ivan -Anriette, Roly, Dominique, Michelle -Merline, Ariane, Nelson
2- Social solidarity	- Help from neighbours - Support from friend(s) or colleagues; - Assistance of distant spouse(s); - Association and meeting	-Marthe, Michelle, Jeanne -Diane, Esther, Roly. -Esther, André, Ariane. -Michelle, Jeanne, Michelle, Marthe.
3- Small-scale Income-generating activity	-Trade -Sewing -Hairdressing -Nurse -Teacher(s) -Social assistant -Secretary -State agent	-Marthe, Michelle, Jeanne. -Anriette, Roly, Dominique. -Corine, André, Diane. -Audrey. -Esther, Roly -Judith -Armandie -Nelson

Source: Our findings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the determinants of female single parenthood and the means of survival of single parents in the face of poverty in rural areas in Cameroon. The qualitative methodology, relying on semi-directive interviews and direct observation in the Nanga-Eboko locality (Cameroon), reveals that female single parenthood, whether involuntary or desired, is based on psychological and sociological determinants such as age, social pressure, customs and the desire for professional integration. In response to poverty, these single-parent families develop livelihoods strategies based on family solidarity, social support and small income-generating activities,

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mainly in the informal sector. Thus, the massive resort of women to multiple livelihood strategies allows them to adapt to the dynamics of Cameroonian family structures.

Based on the logics categorized along the two socio-cultural and individual axes, the existence of a 'chosen' single parenthood is evidence of a personal choice regarding the beginning of the situation or even the extension of the phenomenon. Involuntary single parenthood is more revealing and shows the imbalance in the relationship between couples. Lefaucher, quoted by Martin (1996), reveals that single, separated and divorced mothers, who represent various forms of family dissociation, have long been understood and considered to be “social risks” because of the isolation, loss of sociability, support and integration that they cause.

On the other hand, in our study, women are committed to their children's schooling, because for them, their children are their “reason for living”. To this end, their slogan is: “*My child exists, therefore I am*”. This indicates the huge responsibility that these women have that falls to these women in the education of their children. Although the 1931 Customary Code states that “*the woman must take care of the household and the children until the age of 3 to 5 years (rule 122)*” (Mouhamadou Seidou, 2005), the female single parents surveyed take care of their children from 0 to 7 years of age and far beyond these ages. In short, it would be advisable to extend this research by carrying out in-depth studies, firstly on the customs of the populations in the Cameroonian study area, with regard to the evolution of families, the consequences of the single-parent phenomenon for children and finally on the full responsibility of the male spouse, from the birth of the child until adulthood, in terms of providing for basic needs. On the other hand, in-depth analyses on family organization should be undertaken, through public policies to improve the living conditions of single mothers and to combat poverty, which significantly takes into account the status of women from a gender approach.



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