



# REBUILDING THE HOMES OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN THE COVID-19 ERA: A CASE STUDY

Marceline Yeke L.

## Abstract

*Single motherhood in social discourse has its unique challenges especially for women who are not in a position to negotiate the kind of life they want. The 'missing male' factor has led to the description of a family of a woman in such a state as 'incomplete' or 'broken', which makes her definition of home different from others with 'complete families'. Apart from the emerging 'working class', many women do not plan to become single mothers so they are in a dire situation which can be compounded by a pandemic such as COVID-19. Using feminine tools, a case study of Akua reveals the underlying causes of single motherhood which are overlooked in discourses and so have not been properly addressed. It attests that the socio-cultural structures that prioritize the male suppressing the female accounts for the rising phenomenon of single mothers. The study also highlights the neglect suffered by single mothers as a category of persons in social discourse who are deprived, consequent of which they are subject to lack of sources of security, identity, and suffer from a negative self-image and are financially incapable. As a result, policies made to combat the virus and to rebuild communities may not benefit single mothers unless they are considered among the 'deserving poor'. The paper advocates that churches, government and those planning policy and rebuilding of homes especially in the COVID-19 era should not consider single motherhood as a social problem to be solved, but a social reality to be helpfully addressed, otherwise any solution may not properly meet the needs of single mothers.*

## Introduction

The novel COVID-19 pandemic period requires a rebuilding of homes and families due to the crippling effect of the virus on several economies. The virus was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International concern on 30th January 2020 and confirmed on 11th February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled it COVID-19. Emanating from Wuhan, China in December 2019, it spread to Europe, USA, Asia, and other parts of the world. The first case in Africa was confirmed in

Nigeria on 27th February 2020, and since then, every country has registered some infections, deaths and recoveries. In compliance with WHO, every government has been making conscious and situational based effort to curb the spread of the virus and cater to the needs of those infected. Following the dramatic increase in the number of those infected by the virus in West and Central Africa, it became incumbent on governments to lock down completely or partially shut down certain parts of their countries. With a higher incidence of the virus, people were called to stay home 'as much as possible'. Within the same period, it was necessary to reach out to the vulnerable, so the 'deserving poor' were offered emergency relief support packages. These efforts during such an unprecedented crisis are laudable, but many have not ceased to wonder why these 'poor' who have been in this condition before the outbreak of the virus did not merit this kind of attention. Another unanswered question has been: How do the homeless stay at home? The caution for people to stay at home 'as much as possible' could, therefore, mean different things for different categories of persons.

Also, every single mother is part of the community undergoing the crisis posed by this virus, but her challenges could be compounded by her state if she is not considered among the 'deserving poor'. The UNFPA report of May 13, 2020, projects an exponential growth of COVID-19 confirmed cases in countries like Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, following the ease of lockdown and other measures. The growing number of active cases (66.5%) with several people in need of medical services and essential needs poses a challenge and a concern for community consciousness over the spread of the disease ([www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19](http://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19)). The continuous rise of infection rates implies the continuous disintegration of homes and families as a global challenge that will pre-occupy every state and nation of the world. However, policies made to combat the virus and to rebuild communities may not benefit every member of the community, especially single mothers.

Though all people are more likely to die of the disease, scholarship should be concerned about how the situation has impacted women because the survival of many societies depends on them ([www.euro.who.int](http://www.euro.who.int)). This is important considering that in many societies women are primary caregivers; they do the majority of unpaid labour in their productive and reproductive functions, and thus, function as the backbone of every society. Any pandemic that threatens the globe is, therefore, a concern, since women

will be doubly affected. The essence of such scholarship is to ascertain the disproportionate way the pandemic impacts the lives of women and girls who were already marginalized and stigmatized in areas where the gender gap is wide ([www.Gavi.org](http://www.Gavi.org)). This will shape policy concerning these categories of persons so that their needs are not ignored. It also draws attention to the vulnerable especially single-parent women who have not been considered as such around the globe, so that every policy should be inclusive in tackling the challenges they face daily.

To achieve this, the impact of the pandemic on Akua (actual name withheld), a young woman aged 32 living in Akropong, Akuapem North District, Ghana, is examined. I contacted her for interviews and she gave her consent to participate in the research. Since the subject of research limits face to face contact with respondents, this paper is based mostly on direct calls and discussions made with the respondent between April and May 2020. Much of the data used here is obtained through virtual discussions. However, I was able to meet with Akua on two occasions at Akropong-Akuapem District, Eastern Region of Ghana while maintaining social distance rules. Though a resident of Kumba, Cameroon, I have been in Akropong, Ghana during this COVID-19/Coronavirus pandemic. To understand what is home for Akua and the impact of the pandemic on her, this paper is structured as follows: definitions; a narrative of the woman and her coping mechanisms; analysis of the situation and recommendations. COVID-19 in perspective.

Definitions are essential, from the perspective of immediate action, by identifying who is eligible to receive needed assistance, or to identify from a research perspective, those who fit the description. From a policy point of view, definitions enable those planning to identify those to be included in planning, and also note the kind of assistance needed. Though the definitions here are research-focused, they have policymakers and those planning for the rebuilding of homes and communities during the pandemic and in the post-COVID-19 period in perspective.

Home is used here to refer to the space where everyone shares daily experiences, defines the self and asserts it. Home has often been erroneously presented as if it is a stable and fixed place, and so, ideologically it is considered as a naturalized ground for a feminine identity (Foster 2002:34). For most men, home is where they return to their wives and kids after a day's activities. For women, it is the space where they are expected to give care to a husband and kids and other residents. It is often considered the

woman's sphere according to a domestic ideology which sees domesticity as an essential quality of femininity. Most communities have also understood home as a place where members of a family live, a 'normal home' is seen, therefore, as a secure place where everyone who is a family member feels a sense of belonging. The family then refers to a group of people sharing spaces in a home. Normalized family includes father, mother, child/ children, and in some contexts other family members. The family has as its basic core, the acquisition of resources, caring, responsibilities and obligations, so, there appears to be an intrinsic connection between what it is and what members do (Silva & Smart 1999:7).

In several communities, it is normal for a single man to own a home in anticipation of bringing in a woman to share the space with her. On the other hand, it is considered unusual for a woman to own a home out of wedlock since she is expected to marry and move to the husband's home. Single women's constitution of the family, therefore, differs remarkably from the normative structures and institutions put in place. The family of a single mother is seen as either 'incomplete' or 'broken', because of the 'missing male' factor, so home for them may be different from those with 'complete' families. Also, how they comply to domesticity in the event of homelessness has not been properly addressed, and so a study of the situation could reveal that their experiences are radically different and beg attention from churches, government and those planning for the rebuilding of homes and families in the post-crisis period. Discourses in scholarship which is done from a privileged position risk missing out on these differences, and as such, is unable to address the challenges of such women who are expected to comply with domesticity, yet there are no favourable conditions for them to operate.

Coronaviruses that are disrupting economies and threatening to disrupt homes and families are identified with a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections. These can range from the common cold to more serious diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). They are also said to be zoonotic, meaning it can be transmitted between animals and people. The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. Every nation has heeded the continuous call of the WHO to put measures in place to contain the spread of the virus. This implies that in one way or the other

everyone is affected by the pandemic, although the effect for some people can be minimal while for some categories of persons it can be quite serious. The virus has caused a crisis that affects all and sundry and also exposed further the vulnerability of women, especially single mothers in ways that need to be highlighted.

Single parenthood is a social category used in discourse to delineate those who become parents through unconventional means, outside the normative norm in a heterosexual marriage partnership. Those who operate out of the established norms may be seen as 'incomplete', or 'abnormal' since they defy societal expectations. A single mother is used here, therefore, to refer to a woman who becomes a parent and out of the norm, is single-handedly raising her kid(s). Such a woman is seen as defiant since she contravenes the established societal expectations and so threatens the very fabric on which society is built. The high incidence of single parenthood is not a social problem to be solved, but a social reality to be helpfully addressed. This category of women are unmarried and considered dangerous to society (Oduyoye 2002:37). Because of the stigma attached, no one envies a single woman parent. The social, emotional, and economic pressures on one-parent families are enormous (Pickhardt 1996:viii). This phenomenon is on the rise especially in African countries and comes with high demands; while some women decide to be single parents and so are considered as non-conformists, others find themselves in the situation with no prior planning.

## **Some Characteristics of Single Mothers**

The woman studied identifies with several factors that led to her status of single motherhood. Her story indicates that most single mothers go through a myriad of experiences. Since single mothers have children out of the normative family organization, their situation is considered 'immoral and bastardy'. Their families are derogatorily described in discourse as 'broken' or 'incomplete' due to the 'missing male'. This pitiful description is made because of the contravention of the established need for a woman to marry a man who 'owns' her according to legal and social norms. In this regard, the unmarried, widows and deserted wives are expected to keep off sexual activities. Women who chose to have children in the states mentioned and become single mothers are seen as non-con-

formists. They are also seen as moral failures since all women should consider it a 'privilege to serve men' in the married state (Oduyoye 2002:36). Elizabeth B. Silvia (1996:15) confirms that the ideal of domesticity was based upon the role of women assisting men and this pattern continued into the twentieth century. So, women who are not married are a threat to society. However, since motherhood is synonymous to womanhood, many women get children without being coupled and the effects of their action differ in terms of their source of security, identity, self-image and financial competence.

A revolutionary appropriation to motherhood is being brought by corporate and established women. This category of persons forms the minority of women who acquire their primary identity in their personhood, jobs and careers. Such 'working class' also referred to in Cameroon as 'functionaries', are women capable of employing nursemaids to do child-minding for them. This category of women, by owning homes and constituting their family types, are negotiating new identities for themselves by conforming to 'natural' motherhood expectations yet mothering in ways that suit their own needs and interests (Silva 1996:16). They are viewed suspiciously by married women, and often tagged in society as 'anti-marriage'. They have kids to 'secure' them at old age, and they have also refused to submit their wills and lives to men in marriage.

Mothering then becomes an additional social function in which these women desire to identify themselves, womanhood for them is inscribed differently from those who see mothering as a primary responsibility, and their challenges would differ considerably, compared to those who lack financial securities.

Though many societies construct mothering as an essential psychological or moral attribute of women, the majority of those who become single-parent mothers did not plan for it. Unlike 'functionaries', this category of women does not have formal education or training which can qualify them for employment with government or mercantile institutions as 'functionaries'. So, many are 'street' or 'petty' traders who either hawk or display their wares on make-shift stalls or spots in different markets and locations. In trying to solve their financial needs, many end up attaching themselves with men and also end up with more kids while the men disappear from their lives. Since most women become mothers not by choice, but exigency, their definition of home and family is muddy, and

they are unable to negotiate for themselves their own needs and preferences. Their lives are characterized by the incessant struggle to survive, and as such many suffer from enormous financial and psychological burdens.

### **The Case of Akua as a Single Parent in a COVID-19 Era**

Akua, a young woman aged 32 living in Akropong, Akuapem North District, Ghana, is a single mother of two teenage boys and two younger girls. Living in a rented room of a type described as 'face me I slap you', she occupies the space with her kids, while sharing facilities with other tenants in the compound. Her father passed on when she was in JHS 3, Akua became pregnant and dropped out of school since her mother could not afford tuition fees and the uncles who were expected to assist her did not care. The young man who impregnated her initially denied that he was responsible, blaming her for letting herself get pregnant. He even asked her that 'does it mean you don't know your menstrual cycle? Why did you come to my house at the time it was not your safe period?' He went to the extent of saying that he was not the only one Akua was dating and told her that she should go and look for a solution to her problem. He threatened her saying: 'I don't want to see you ever again until you solve your problem'. He further asked her 'why do you want to destroy my future which my parents have invested so much in, and are expecting highly from me? Besides, I am not ready for fatherhood, neither am I ready to marry, I will marry when I want'. Every attempt to persuade him to take responsibility proved futile, and Akua left his place with brokenness.

Being the eldest daughter, her uncles compelled the young man and his parents to do the formal 'introduction' which permitted her to move in with him. He was at that time a graduate who was preparing for youth service. Akua reports a series of verbal and physical abuses she endured during the two-year period she spent with him, hoping things would get better, but it got worse with time. It came to a point when she and the one-year-old baby were starved and yet the man was demanding to have her sexually. When she resisted, he physically abused her. When she could no longer endure it, she fled to her mother's home. She tearfully narrates how she got the other kids thus:

So, after I ran to my mother's place, I stayed there for some time turning down dates for sex.

Married men came to seek my hand for a relationship but I was not ready. When my first child was three years, I fell for a man who had separated from his wife. He promised me marriage but ended up reconciling with his ex-wife. Another man came who was widowed but because he was having an affair and was abusive, I chased him away only to discover that I was a month gone already. He did not return, even when the baby came, I thought he will be excited but he stayed aloof. The third child came from a loving and caring man, but he was married. He explained to me that he came to me because his wife had been denying him sex since she entered menopause and was uncomfortable with coitus. I dated him for some time but when the wife discovered, she threatened me so I quit, and later found out I was pregnant. When I approached him, he retorted that he was not the only one sleeping with me, so, I gave birth to the child without his support. Later he came to ask me for sexual favour as a condition for child support which I turned down and so he absconded his responsibilities. I do not blame him though, it's all my fault. All that time I used to go to church but I did not know Christ, so even the fourth child came from a one-night stand with a man during one 'Odwira' festival. I did not know where he came from and when I discovered the pregnancy he was gone. By this time I had moved out of my mother's place to rent.

Akua's readiness to assume mother and wife roles is seen in the fact that she did not opt for abortion in any of these cases. Unlike in the West, it is rare to see an African girl or woman opt for the choice of not getting married or not having children. The consequence is that many girls are always ready to marry even for 'a living' in conformity to the established norms, guaranteeing that she will concentrate on taking care of her husband, the home and the children while the man works to supply their needs. Since this failed, Akua carries a basin of vegetables moving around the town and selling. Her daily profit ranges from GHC 20-40 (ie 20-40 Ghana Cedis). After hawking, she then buys six bundles of kenkey and shito or other readymade food like banku, pepper and sachet water for her family. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted market conditions causing the sales to drop. Since March she finds it difficult to make GHC 25 a day, so on most occasions, she and the kids eat "garri and sugar" or they go hungry. For almost three months, they 'don't know the 'taste of fish' because they simply cannot afford it. They rely on a specie of tiny fish called 'one-man-thousand' to eat the kenkey or banku. She is wondering what would happen if the 'virus does not end'. For her, staying at home is tantamount to death for her and the children since she has no support from any other



source. She does not have electricity since she cannot afford the bills. Similarly, though the pipes are connected, she cannot have water running in the house since she cannot afford to pay for storage tanks. Every day, she buys a few buckets of water from the neighbour so they can wash the vegetables for sale, cook, or take a bath. On days that she cannot afford the money, the children will go without a bath or move to the church institution to beg for water.

For Akua, her faith in God is a basic factor that keeps her going despite the challenges. She has an optimistic outlook concerning the future which she thinks will be better. She knows her business and has mastered her dealings with her suppliers and customers, so despite the odds, she does not think of herself as an object of pity. Intrigued by her deep sense of the direction of God in her affairs, I inquired about the role the church is playing in addressing her situation. She is assured by the fact that God will never abandon her so, she has developed enough faith to sustain her in crisis. Her lack of material background which has continued to date caused her to seek God for her source of security. On how the church has encouraged her, she appreciates the Women's Fellowship group of the church she attends that reaches out to her once a year during their Fellowship Week celebration. This takes place during their annual evangelistic routine outreach programmes when she receives 5 kilograms of rice and some vegetable oil. Akua expressed deep faith in God and not in human beings thus:

When I did not know Christ, I made many mistakes which caused me to be hurting and suffering, but now it is different. I know God personally after giving birth to my last child, I came to know about Jesus and gave my life to him, so he healed my past hurts and insecurities. Before COVID-19, I go to church every Sunday and pay my tithes and offertory. No one in the church has ever asked me how I survive with the children, but God has been our support. We may sleep hungry some days but we cannot forget to thank God for keeping us alive.

The Ghanaian lady presents amongst those struggling with faith in God and the reality of her situation, where there is deprivation of basic economic and cultural capital before and during the pandemic, which seems unnoticed by either the church or state. If those considered well-resourced complain about the impinging effect of the COVID-19 on the economy, then the situation of those who cannot afford basic means of survival is precarious. With the prevailing circumstances, everyone is challenged to

make some adjustments in one aspect of life or another but how can people who ‘have no life’ make such adjustments? There is, for instance, a tangible perception of skyrocketing prices of basic commodities like food and medication. Paracetamol which used to be GhC 1 is now sold for GhC 1.50 implying that living cost has definitely ‘gone up’. Everywhere the excuse for the price hike is that goods are scarce due to the closure of borders. The situation of single mothers in these precarious times cannot continue to be ignored.

It is therefore indisputable that the financial situation of Akua is really ‘hard’, she cannot talk about any household income, or affordable housing, change of wardrobe or afford utilities like water and electricity, or home-schooling for the kids, however, she is very optimistic about the future. Besides ‘homelessness’, Akua cannot afford the necessities of life; she has to buy water daily, and if she doesn’t make any sales, the children cannot bath. And the government is asking people including her to stay at home and wash hands with running water. How is this possible for people who cannot afford water to drink?

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, the government shut down schools while calling on parents to undertake home-schooling as an option. These prescriptions and undertakings are oriented toward fostering children’s cultural capital stocks and ensuring that they have a brighter future. For Akua, this call is for those privileged parents who can afford educational tablets, laptops, pay private tutors and encourage extra-curricular activities. She cannot even think about these issues as she explained: “My children cannot even stay at home; they have to join me to hawk otherwise we all shall go hungry. I have told them not to look at their friends who are moving around with phones and all types of gadgets, they should concentrate on what I am asking them to do because their present survival depends on it. If we cannot even afford to feed daily, is it a laptop that I can buy?”

It is not that Akua does not want to stay home or home-school her kids, she cannot afford the finances required to get the gadgets needed for home-schooling. We cannot deny that Akua wants a better future for her kids, but the means is just not there. In the present circumstances, the struggle each day is to get something to eat, while entrusting the future into God’s hand.

## **Analysis of the Case**

The analysis is done from the perspective of feminist critique and advocacy: a critique of the structures that render women single mothers, making them homeless and vulnerable; and advocacy for proper social consideration of the plight of those in this situation. The underlying structures put in place by many societies and through which gender differences and inequalities are constructed account for the increasing number of single mothers in our African societies today. This also explains the dilemma Akua finds herself in. The issues concerning the marriage institution derogate women while privileging men. Young men are conscious of this cultural and social elevation of men, sanctioning masculine privilege and repressing the feminine. One of such privileges is the restriction on a woman to propose marriage. Since a woman cannot propose to a man, many men resort to deceitful common clichés like ‘I want to marry you’ or ‘I love you’ as a starting point for a relationship. And when the lady is pregnant, she cannot decide whether to get married or not since the decision to marry rests on the man as seen in Akua’s case. Though her uncles forced her to marry, the young man was not ready for marriage. For the young man, it was not right for her to ‘tie him down’ through pregnancy. The irony is that the sexual act and marriage are often initiated by men. Then, how is it that it is the woman who is ‘tying down’ the man if children are expected to be born within marriage?

Such a denial implies that it is the woman who desires marriage and not the man who initiated the sexual act, and this seems superfluous. Boys and men initiate and also demand sex as proof of love, as seen in the story. This is also disadvantageous to women and girls as seen in Akua’s case, many get ready for marriage at a younger age but have to wait for a man to propose so they can accept the proposal. Some give in to the sex demand and end up with a pregnancy that is not planned, like Akua. Some pregnancies are however planned as some men go to the extent of conditioning a girl to get pregnant to prove her motherhood abilities before marriage. This is because marriage and motherhood are held together in a connection in which they are often seen to be synonymous (Bortolaia 1996:16). The idea of seeing a woman as an incubator, rather than a person in her worth is absurd and these tendencies have not been properly addressed. Erroneously, the synonymous connection between marriage and motherhood, and the domestication of the feminine has led women to believe that they derive their identity from their motherhood roles.

Ironically, this role is socially subordinated to the breadwinner function of men. It is also a betrayal to women because since girls spend their lives preparing for motherhood and wife roles instead of building their womanhood, they are perpetually made to financially depend on husbands. The absence of the man puts them in a dilemma, with no home, and no means of sustenance as seen in the case of Akua. This is not the same for boys who spend their time preparing for manhood, building their careers and making money. The double standards in these structures need to be carefully thought over. Unless a distinction is made between personhood and roleplay, more women will continue to falsely derive their identity primarily, from their motherhood roles. Until this distinction is made, society should stop blaming girls for getting pregnant at a young age or blaming widows for having additional babies. Differentiating the role women play from who they are, becomes very crucial. Oduyoye (2002:39) confirms this and calls the church to order that:

In Africa, the church focuses on homemaking and motherhood to the neglect of the self-development of women beyond what will directly benefit the men, children and homemaking. A theology that disparages women's humanity portrays women as devoid of initiative or dangerous to the community when taking initiative, ought to be countered. The church, therefore, needs to emphasize the essential humanity of men and women as a defining principle for the socialisation process. The basic assumption that for every young girl of marriageable age, there must be a young man who will come to ask for her hand in marriage and that the man will supply the needs of his family should be reviewed. These assumptions are erroneous, as this traditional pattern of socialization is failing women. Though supported by the church, the betrayal of women is seen in Akua's story, who experienced a series of disappointments in her desire to marry. Similarly, making girls believe that they should invest primarily in being a wife and a mother, is fallacious, the second goal can be achieved even through unconventional means, but the first is becoming more elusive since boys are not prepared for husband roles or fatherhood, this leads to scarcity of husbands and fathers in the multitude of men (see Ombelet 2018:158-171).

Girls like boys should also be groomed to pursue self-development, career enhancement and business as a primary responsibility, to enable them to build homes for themselves when they leave their parent's homes and also choose to settle down in marriage when they 'want'. The idea should be

discouraged that girls should leave their parents only when they are about moving to their husband's homes. In this case, if the marriage and the man are not 'achieved' the crisis of the 'missing male' in the life of the woman will be minimized since she can be self-sustaining. In this light, a pregnant girl will not be tagged as a 'destroyer' of the career of a boy just because she demands a right to have a home in which the child can be born and nurtured. To minimise the incidence of pre-marriage pregnancies, parents should 'invest' in their girls too, and 'expect' much from them. It will also empower women to be able to initiate relationships and speak out when they are convinced that they love a man. The approach will eventually cancel the popular notion that men are scarce and that the one who dates or marries is doing the woman a favour.

Women are called upon to learn from the biblical Ruth who went to Boaz and initiated for her future. Boaz's acceptance of Ruth's proposal proves that it should not be considered culturally offensive when a woman is proposing marriage or saying 'I love you' to genuinely initiate a relationship with a man. Girls and women should, therefore, take investment seriously because it will enable them to have a home of their own in case some factors 'put asunder' what God has 'put together'. This masculine privilege also requires that when her bride-wealth (price) is paid, the woman moves from her parents' home to the husband's. From thence, the husband becomes her top priority. This implies that culturally, a girl cannot compel a boy to go and pay her bride-wealth. This is often misconstrued as an act of 'desperation' since many young men consider this to be undue pressure mounted on them, thus the cliché common with boys that says, 'I will marry when I want'. The issue of payment of bride-wealth should not be a problem. Rather, it should be revisited, and the original intention which was an exchange between two families reinstated so that it should not be a male prerogative. When this is adopted, some women who are financially buoyant and opt to assist their less financially viable boyfriends to pay their bride-wealth will not be termed as 'desperados'. Instead of frowning on them, such ventures should be encouraged by society and the church. This can usher in gender parity between the two partners.

It is uncontested that most often when a man is saying that 'I am not ready to marry', there is the underlying financial constraint in meeting up with the cultural expectations required for him to bring a woman to his home. The participation of women in every process of marriage and financing of the home will confirm that the male and female created by God are both

endowed with abilities to ‘fill the earth and subdue it as well as rule over other creatures’ due to the indiscriminate blessings given them by God (Genesis 1:28). Acknowledging the essential equality of men and women will also wipe off the erroneous interpretation that a girl’s contribution to the payment of her bride-wealth is the desire for her to control the man, therefore, financial control is not meant for women who must be economically dependent on men (Oduyoye 2002:39).

Also, from Akua’s story, it is revealed that the silence of several communities to call men to assume their part of the responsibility for unplanned pregnancies is also a betrayal of women. The lack of accountability is evident in young men who get women pregnant and deny responsibility for such actions and also refuse to provide the resources needed to raise the child(ren). Like the men who impregnated Akua, many go scot-free after such an act, and yet, the woman is often solely blamed for the consequences of the crime. This reminds us of the case of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1ff. The story shows that but for Jesus’ intervention, the double standards of the people in Jesus’ day would have led to the stoning and death of the woman caught in adultery while the man is left to go free. We see this double standard prevailing in many societies today as many young people are not ready to commit to a woman by officially performing the marriage rites.

On the advocacy note, the story indicates that single motherhood is seen as a social problem to be solved, and not necessarily, a social reality to be helpfully addressed. Certainly, some girls chose reckless and loose living and end up with unwanted pregnancies. These are exceptional cases so viewing single-parent families as a ‘broken’ or ‘incomplete’ home that provides inadequate care and protection, leads to the wrong notion that it eventually produces troubled children. To a greater extent, there is no justification for assuming that single mothers are incapable of raising responsible children, and this is tantamount to blaming the victim instead of the perpetrator. On the other hand, when men deny domesticating those who get pregnant for them as seen in Akua’s case, it should be considered an offence against the established structures. So, all single motherhood should not be seen as women breaking bounds, but men undermining the system put in place to authenticate marriage as a communal affair. The implication is that motherhood can be single in the African setting, despite the challenges faced by single mothers.

The challenge of the lingering social stigma is seen where married women are suspicious of women living as single mothers. A segment of the society stereotypically considers them as potential ‘husband snatchers’. As a result, they are disrespected in diverse ways. So, they may have shelter over their head, food on their table, clothes on their bodies but they are still poor. This is observed by Mother Teresa that ‘we think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest’. The observation is important since the status of a person determines his/her sense of identity. From the story, we observe that stereotypical comments reduce the esteem of single mothers thus, affecting their sense of identity. Frowning at single mothers because they do not fit into the category of persons considered ‘normal’ due to the ‘missing male’ factor is problematic.

Ironically, no one seems to question where this ‘missing male’ is though it takes two to produce a child. It is obvious that most single mothers are not in control of their life’s circumstances and this has not been addressed in discourses. The ability to cope depends on whether they accept or reject these stereotypes. Carl E. Pickhardt (1996:vii) undergirds this when he writes:

This social prejudice is as wrong as it is real. However, to the extent that single parents accept this stereotype, they will undercut their confidence with doubt, attack their self-esteem with guilt, and end up indicting themselves for inadequacy no matter how much they care or how hard they try. Not only is all this self-recrimination for no good cause, it can actually reduce the effectiveness of their parenting.

Social prejudice plays on the women and impacts them as seen in the story. The ‘missing male’ for Akua renders her home ‘incomplete’ as described in social discourses, therefore, access to food, protection, and providence that comes with male presence is lacking. Also, privacy at home or even staying at home during COVID-19 pandemic is challenging. Considering the conditions under which they live; Akua is renting in a ‘face me I slap you’ kind of housing setting, every day, they look forward anxiously to the dawn so they can step out of the room into some fresh air outside. Thus, even though the government ‘uses police to compel us to stay home’ because of the pandemic, Akua says, ‘we cannot stay indoors’. From all indications, the Coronavirus pandemic has extolled an added psychological effect on Akua and her children especially the days they had to drink water and sleep without food. Although this is not new to them

they are experiencing extreme cases during the pandemic and Government relief package or churches' support is yet to reach them. Because of their deprivation, they do not understand what it means to readjust practices to the new possible or rebalance shifting conditions of existence to the 'new normal'. For them, their condition predates and should be perceived separately from the change in the economic climate brought by the pandemic. Instead, they would prefer to literally 'get the virus' than 'die of hunger' which is a long-standing problem not necessarily caused by the pandemic. Concerning food, clothing, or a vacation, they are used to 'going without' as their *modus vivendi*. So, the 'new normal' brings nothing new as such, nonetheless, Akua worries that it may compound their already dire situation.

There is no fundamental difference, however, between the strategies adopted as a result of the pandemic. Apart from putting on nose masks, which only Akua wears because she cannot afford to buy for her children, she goes out daily to sell her wares, it is business as usual. As to how risky the exposure to the virus is, she agrees that it is high but she cannot do otherwise, she simply does not have the means and so, she and the children cannot stay at home. Risking the children is not a choice especially in Ghana where a mask costs between GHC 3 to GHC 5. The lines of action, tactics and sacrifices of this family are not, in fact, adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic as such, rather, it is their usual survival strategies and coping mechanisms.

## Conclusion

Akua's story is a reflection of the way struggling women are deprived of the fullness of life because they belong to another gender. It highlights how the structural system disempower women and places them in a position of homelessness and deprivation. Women are displaced from their parent's homes to assume wife and mother roles in their new homes and expected to make their husbands their top priority, this places them in perpetual subordination of and dependence on men. Unfortunately, for some like Akua, male support can be elusive rendering them homeless, vulnerable and unable to cope effectively during a pandemic. The story also reveals the insensitivity of the church, state and society to the needs of single mothers as women who are simply human. A pandemic like COVID-19, therefore, further exposes their vulnerability and inability to



negotiate the type of life they desire to live. This begs for attention to be focused on this category of persons whose situation is compounded during the crisis. Policymakers and those planning for the rebuilding of homes and families should, therefore, factor in this category of people and meet their needs accordingly. Since marriage is the basic institution for building up of communities, we need to be critical of the issues around it; like, readiness for marriage, socialization, payment of bride-wealth, who initiates a relationship. The gender privileging and the discriminatory values attached to gendered roles need to be reviewed. This would right some of the wrongs of cultural betrayal on women and give them a level platform on which they can function effectively to negotiate the type of identities they want for themselves. Finally, considering single motherhood as a social reality to be helpfully addressed, will avert the social stigma attached to it, this is important because of the revolution ushered in by the 'working class' which allows them to negotiate the type of life they want, and to recreate identities which accord women the sense of dignity they deserve as human beings.

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