

# Examining Work Re-Entry Decisions for Single Mothers through Bourdieu's Capital Theory

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents the qualitative results of a larger mixed-methods study on how barriers to, and determinants of, the labour market shape re-entry decisions and the role of economic/cultural/social determinants in influencing employment re-entry decisions for single mothers residing in urban Sarawak. Through the lens of Bourdieu's capital theory, the study examined the decision-making process of single mothers and provided nuanced insights into the factors that enable or impede access to necessary resources for re-entry to work. Data were collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 26 single mothers in urban Sarawak. The findings revealed that cultural (education), economic (finance), and social (family) capitals were both enabling and impeding factors and were inextricably linked in shaping employment re-entry decisions. Low volumes of these capitals perpetuated the poverty cycle for a majority of these single mothers. The findings reinforced the complexity of integrating single mothers, who have low incomes and low education levels, into employment. Nevertheless, poverty among single mothers and their children can be substantially limited through the right mix of social, education and labour market policies. The study highlights the challenges facing single mothers in urban areas in developing countries, which are quite different from rural areas or developed countries.*

**Keywords:** *single mothers; Bourdieu's capital theory; cultural; economic; social capital, work re-entry decisions, employment*



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The number of single mothers in Malaysia is increasing. Malaysia's Home and Population Census, carried out by the Statistics Department in 2010, reported a total of 831,860 women (2.9% of the total population) who were widowed, divorced (with kids) or permanently separated (Ismail, Husin, Rahim, Kamal, & Mat, 2016). The distribution of single mothers consists of widows 72%, divorcees 23%, husbands uncountable or missing 4%, and abandoned by husbands 1% (Ismail et al., 2016). The distribution by state-ranked Sarawak ninth highest, with 8,011 single mothers (Sim, 2007). Nevertheless, the Social Welfare Department stipulated that only a small percentage of single mothers are registered, thus making them eligible for aid from the Ministry (Nor, Hasan, Omar, Vellymalay, & Omar, 2018).

Single mothers hold many roles and responsibilities. They are often the sole breadwinner of the family and the primary caregiver for their children and the family members under their care. As a result, they are also economically vulnerable, supporting themselves and their family (Taylor & Conger, 2017). There are many provisions for single mothers or lone parents in welfare states or industrialised countries, such as monetary assistance, health insurance coverage, and in-kind benefit vouchers. These are often tied to work (Waring & Meyer, 2020), be it from individual earnings or from child support, such as (the ones) those in America (Narain, Bitler, Ponce, Kominski, & Ettner, 2017), or workplace support in Europe (Haas & Hwang, 2019). However, in developing countries, forms of assistance for single mothers are either non-existent or what exists is still insufficient (Aw & Sabri, 2020), resulting in a rather bleak picture for the well-being of single mothers and their dependents (Aw & Sabri, 2020; Rahman, Abdullah, Darus, & Mansor, 2017). To illustrate, Abdul Talib, Abdul Mutalib, Shahabudin & Mahmud (2020) found that most single mothers working in Malaysia tended to have income below the poverty line.

Employment is often cited as a route out of poverty, as it provides the central vehicle for social mobility. Full employment is reported as a panacea for low-income families, particularly lone-parent families (Damaske, Bratter, & Frech, 2017). A considerable amount of literature has been published on single mothers, employment structure, and work re-entry. These studies indicate that full-time employment is strongly related to more significant economic welfare than part-time employment (Damaske &

Frech, 2016). Furthermore, female single parents are less likely to be employed than their married counterparts (Caragata, Cumming, & Watters, 2018), irrespective of the age of their youngest child, alluding to the complexity of employment for single mothers (Lleras, 2008; Radcliffe, Cassell, & Malik, 2021).

The number of single mothers in Malaysia has increased over time (Heng, 2017; Mulia, 2017; UNDP Malaysia, 2020). This has been attributed to predominantly adult mortality (Rahman et al., 2017), divorce or separation (Aw & Sabri, 2020). In 2019, the number of divorces increased 12.0% from 50,862 (2018) to 56,975 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Mothers experience separation and divorce before the age of 30 and widowhood after 40 (Abdul Talib et al., 2020). Additionally, urbanisation, migration, globalisation, and the demand for socio-economic well-being have led to the break-up of families (Kamarudin, Chong Hui, & Abdul Majeed, 2013).

The voices of single mothers in Sarawak are largely missing from the research literature. The number of single mothers (Yeap, 2020) and poverty level remains significantly higher than in other states in Malaysia (Redmond, Praino, & Siddiquee, 2017), which gives rise to the necessity of this study. Given that the demographic continues to increase in number, it is important to understand what barriers and determinants are relevant for work re-entry decisions. Additionally, we seek to understand the contextual variables from mothers residing in urban to have a richer understanding of the challenges of re-entering the labour market. In particular, little is known of the issues they contemplate and decisions they make about employment and familial priorities and the process of negotiating work, family life and childcare responsibilities.

This paper reports on the qualitative results of a larger mixed-methods study. It focuses on how barriers to and determinants of a labour market shape work re-entry decisions. Additionally, it aims to understand the role of the economic/cultural/social determinants in work re-entry decisions for single mothers residing in urban Sarawak. The study questions included:

1. What are the perceived barriers for work re-entry for single mothers in urban Sarawak?
2. What role does social/cultural/economic capital play in the single mothers' work re-entry decisions?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Single Mothers and Employment Barriers**

In this paper, the term “single mothers” encapsulates “all women who legally parent, nurture, and raise a child (or children), who may or may not be a biologically-related dependent, in the absence of an abled father, regardless of marital status” (Lim, Badiozaman & Voon, 2020, p.430). This claim is predicated on the rationale that caregiving for a dependent child without the other abled parent is likely to be equally challenging for women regardless of biological relationship and marital status. However, caregiving by single mothers needs to be carried out following the law (e.g. legally registered for both adopted and biological children) for the benefit of the dependent child (e.g., citizenship, right to education).

Several studies have further revealed that single mothers face multifaceted challenges. Existing studies suggest that the stressors underwent by single mothers are often associated with the financial hardships of raising a family single-handedly, the multiple roles and responsibilities they hold (e.g. mother, daughter, and employee), and the difficult challenge to strike a balance between family (e.g. childcare and housework) and work (Knoef & Ours, 2016). Furthermore, Brady (2016) identified that several factors such as low levels of education and insufficient skills, the lack of affordable childcare, and the need to satisfy basic family needs such as shelter, food, education and childcare have pushed single mothers who are living in poverty into part-time work. The flexibility of part-time work has allowed single mothers to carry out their childcare responsibilities; however, such work is invariably low-paid and insecure, with few promotion opportunities (Lleras, 2008). These instances, in turn, have caused single mothers to suffer higher stress levels, personal and work burnout, and greater episodes of depression as compared to mothers who have a partner to pool resources with (Brady, 2016; Hartwig, 2016; Kramer, Myhra, Zuiker & Bauer, 2016)

The literature generally identifies structure, culture and organisations (Johns, 2013) as barriers to workforce entry for women. Such barriers compound factors to create conflicting work and family obligations, discriminatory workplace policies, gender-role expectations and low levels of self-confidence, which further hinder women from progressing in the

workforce (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh, & Magliozzi, 2019; Ganiyu, Oluwafemi, Ademola, & Olatunji, 2018). In addition, though employment is considered the primary means to achieving financial security, the literature also cited work-family conflict, role overload, and job tension as having a negative impact on both parents and children's well-being (Van den Eynde, Claessens, & Mortelmans, 2020; Zhao, et al., 2020). These reported barriers are further intensified for single mothers (Damaske et al., 2017; Kilkey, 2018), who may lack the cultural and economic capitals that enable access to work re-entry resources.

## **Single Mothers in Sarawak, Malaysia**

Malaysia is a developing country in Southeast Asia, consisting of 13 states and three federal territories. In 2000, the country's single mother population was estimated at 104,991; this number more than doubled in 2010 to 235,240 (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, 2016). Sarawak, the geography under study, is a self-governing state and is ranked ninth highest in terms of single mothers in the country (Sim, 2007).

Although the number of single mothers is rising, research on single mothers in Sarawak is still lacking and warrant further exploration. One major study by Sim (2007) examined the state of single mothers without tertiary education in Sarawak. In her study, Hew highlighted that little schooling opportunities, which led to high rates of low literacy levels among the single mothers in rural areas of Sarawak, have caused these single mothers to secure employment compared to their counterparts in urban areas. Notably, Hew's study claimed that single mothers in rural areas of Sarawak received greater support from their extended families (e.g. parents and grandparents), while single mothers in urban areas either did not have any support network or had to rely on neighbours and friends for support. Such factors often caused single mothers in urban areas to face greater challenges in obtaining childcare than their rural counterparts. This, not surprisingly, became a major impediment to their re-entry into employment. As a result, single mothers with young children in Malaysia often represent the most impoverished families in the country than those with two parents (Mulia, 2017).

Since 2010, Malaysia and Sarawak have implemented major policies and various programs to support and empower single mothers. For

instance, the National Action Plan was developed in 2010 and launched in 2015 by the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development's Department of Women Development and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP Malaysia, 2020) to empower single mothers. Furthermore, in both the 10<sup>th</sup> (2011-2015) and 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia plan (2016-2020) (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia Official Website, 2021), the main focus was on improving support for women in challenging circumstances, such as widows, single mothers, and those with lower incomes (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). To illustrate, the Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (2021) provides income support for groups with specific needs, such as older persons with disabilities and single mothers. Nonetheless, little is known about the effectiveness of such initiatives and whether they have facilitated the return of single mothers to work or made them dependent on financial assistance. Thus, a richer understanding of how various forms of capitals shape the decisions of work re-entry is critical to ensure that the appropriate support is provided to these single mothers.

### **Bourdieu's Capital as a Theoretical Framework for Explaining Work Re-entry Decisions for Single Mothers**

Bourdieu (1993) identifies four main types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital entails economic resources (money, assets, property). Social capital is “conceived as access to resources embedded in social relationships that individuals can accumulate and use to their benefit and advantage” (Buchmann, Kriesi, Bayard, Sander, & Bundel, 2020, p. 4). These resources provide two distinct kinds of capital: social support and social leverage (Ciabattari, 2007). Social leverage refers to using network ties for social mobility, while social support refers to “Ties that offer social support help individuals to cope with the demands of everyday life and other stresses” (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003, p. 113). Cultural capital refers to a person's education and how it provides an advantage in achieving a higher social status or social mobility in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu's capital theory is used to analyse the single mothers' narratives. Concepts of the different capitals can explain how different factors enable or impede access to necessary resources for work re-entry. Note that the gendered nature of the struggle to integrate caring, family and paid work has been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature (Roman, 2019).

In fact, Coleman (1988) described “single-parent families as the most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families that has inhibited the transmission of parents’ human capital to the child” (p. 111). Social, economic and cultural capitals are thus conceived as access to resources that lead to work opportunities, and eventually, social mobility. The underlying premise of these capital frameworks is that individuals with greater amounts of capital – be it support, assistance, information – are more likely to attain outcomes, including work opportunities or conduits for work opportunities. This theoretical choice is warranted as the interest is whether the quality of capital is relevant for the social contexts and their dynamic properties, thereby focusing on the functional components of each capital to shed light on the unequal representation of single mothers in the labour market.

## **Extant Gap**

The use of capital theory as a theoretical construct could augment our understanding of the decision-making process of single mothers to return to work. Yet, surprisingly, empirical studies have paid insufficient attention to the complexity of the concept. Furthermore, in Sarawak, little is known about work re-entry decisions for single mothers residing in the urban area, a landscape that differs from rural areas and developed countries. Additionally, because the determinants for work re-entry for single mothers are not uniform across countries, nor are single mothers homogeneous, the previous literature findings cannot be generalised. This gap has motivated the present study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research offers the understanding “of how people make sense of their lives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 7), which resonates with Dornyei’s (2007) belief that qualitative research excels at “making sense of complexity” (p. 39). Thus, as this study aims to understand which and exactly how certain factors impede single mothers’ re-entry into work, a qualitative orientation was necessary for single mothers to express what was meaningful, unique and culturally salient to them. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews captured the intricacies of exposure, access and accumulation of capitals that shape single mothers’ work re-entry decisions.

Thus, interview questions included: What resources/strategies are needed to facilitate your return to work? What factor(s) can influence your work re-entry decisions?

A simple random sampling approach was adopted in selecting the locations for questionnaire distribution in urban Sarawak during the quantitative phase of this mixed-methods study (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). This resulted in five urban areas, Bintulu, Kuching (i.e. the capital of Sarawak), Miri, Samarahan, and Serian. These areas represented the Southern, Central and Northern Zones of Sarawak. Following the selection of sampling locations, a purposive sampling approach was employed to select the sample participants for the semi-structured interviews based on the following selection criteria: (i) a single mother in urban Sarawak, (ii) have had prior work experience, and (iii) currently not employed. More specifically, the criterion of qualification as a single mother in urban Sarawak refers to all women who legally parent, nurture, and raise a child (or children), who may or may not be a biologically related dependent, in the absence of an abled father, regardless of marital status. We align with the definition of unemployment provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020) - “Those who did not work during the reference week but are interested in working and seeking a job. The unemployed can be classified into two groups: actively and inactively unemployed” (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). A total of 26 participants met these criteria, who volunteered to be interviewed by leaving their contact details at the end of the questionnaire.

Consent was obtained, and participants’ rights were explained prior to the interviews. The interviews with single mothers were conducted in neutral and non-threatening locations of their choice and were conducted in English, Mandarin or Bahasa Melayu, the native language of the research subjects and the researchers. The interviews, of approximately 40 minutes each, were digitally audio-recorded with participants’ permission.

All interviews were transcribed, and NVivo was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial analysis was line-by-line coding to label descriptions, perceptions, and sources of capital. Data were coded into the three themes of the theoretical framework: social, cultural, and economic capitals. In addition, sub-themes were identified, such as gendered expectations, low academic qualifications, and



low income, as either barriers or enablers. The unit of analyses was the process of work re-entry decision-making. These units of analysis were carefully checked and refined through discussion within the research team. The results were further validated through feedback from two colleagues who had phenomenographic research experience and a subject matter expert.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Information

In total, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with single mothers in 2017. The demographics of single mothers are not homogenous. Interviewees were diverse across ethnicity, age group, number of dependents, and academic qualifications. The main group was divorcees with low academic qualifications. The majority of interviewees were Malays (n = 16), followed by Melanau (n = 4) (Table 1a). The average age was 39, with the oldest being 61 and the youngest 24 years old. The average number of children was three per single mother, and the majority had children who were young or in school. Most single mothers described themselves to be in the low socio-economic status (education, income, and employment) or the B40 group, that is, households that earn a monthly income of RM3,855 and below (i.e. low wealth and non-financial asset ownership) (Rokisa, 2019). The majority of the mothers were dependent on welfare assistance (i.e., a minimum of RM100 per child and a maximum of RM450 for a family with four or more children per month). These single mothers reported that they left work primarily to care for their children or ageing family members. Further breakdown of the interviewees' demographic data is as follows (Table 1b).

**Table 1a: Breakdown of Participants' Demographic Data**

Race	Status	Highest Academic Qualifications
Malay	16 Widowed	6 Degree 1
Melanau	4 Divorced	18 Diploma 1
Iban	1 Not married	2 STPM <sup>c</sup> 1
Kenyah	2	GCE/SPM <sup>a</sup> 12
Javanese	2	PMR/SRP <sup>b</sup> 4
Bugis	1	4
		Did not finish school 3
N=26		

- e. GCSE/SPM: The General Certificate of Education/ The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, is a national examination taken by all 11th-form secondary school students in Malaysia. It is equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England.
- d. PMR/PT3/PTM: Penilaian Menengah Rendah (commonly abbreviated as PMR, Malay for Lower Secondary Assessment) was a Malaysian public examination taken by all Form Three students in both government and private schools throughout the country from 1969 to 2013.
- SPM: The Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM, English: Malaysian Higher School Certificate) is a pre-university examination taken by students in Malaysia. STPM is one of the two major pre-university systems for admission to Malaysian public universities.

Table 1b: Demographic Breakdown of the Single Mothers (n = 26)

	Age	Location	Children's Age	Other sources of income (other than from Dept. of Welfare) (per month)	Age	Location	Children's Age	Other sources of income (other than from Dept. of Welfare) (per month)
S1	37	Kuching	16, 12, 9, 5	Pension from late husband RM1100	S16	Miri	16, 14, 10	-
S2	42	Kuching	17, 16, 15	-	S17	Miri	6	-
S3	55	Kuching	12	-	S19	Miri	9, 6, 5	-
S5	44	Kuching	11	-	S21	Miri	20	-
S6	28	Kuching	Ten months old	-	S22	Miri	10, 7, 5, 2*	-
S8	25	Kuching	7, 6	-	S24	Samarahan	21, 15, 3	-
S9	24	Kuching	7, 5	-	S25	Samarahan	16, 10, 8	-
S10	35	Kuching	9, 8, 4	-	S26	Samarahan	26, 24, 20, 19, 16, 4	-
S11	48	Kuching	24, 20	RM400 for special needs son	S27	Samarahan	28, 26, 22, 20, 19, 9, 7	-
S12	41	Kuching	24, 22, 19, 18, 16, 8	-	S28	Samarahan	6, 4	-
S13	31	Kuching	3	Pension from late husband RM1300	S29	Samarahan	16, 14	-
S14	29	Kuching	7, 6	-	S31	Senian	11, 7	-
S15	29	Kuching	7, 5	-	S32	Senian	13, 9, 7, 4	-

Note:  
 \* Working after abandoned grandchildren  
 \*\* Welfare is RM100 per child  
 \*\*\* RM400 for a maximum of 4 or more children per family

Overall, having a paid job to provide for their children and family was central in all the responses. Nonetheless, the qualitative data revealed three main barriers facing single mothers' trying to enter the workplace: (i) low academic qualifications, (ii) primary role as a caregiver, and (iii) financial constraints. These factors are interrelated and do not function in isolation.

**Table 2: Summary of Capitals that Shape Work Re-entry Decisions**

<b>Factors shaping work re-entry decisions</b>	<b>Sources of social/cultural/ economic capital</b>	<b>Enable/Barrier</b>	<b>Illustrative quotes</b>
Social capital	Gendered expectations	<i>Barrier &amp; Enabler</i> Primary role as caregivers led to conflicts in coping with work-family responsibilities	Taking care of my mother is a full-time job. So I have to put my plans on hold (Interviewee 5). Last year I could not [work]. However, with both children in school now, I can work. (Interviewee S29).
Cultural capital	Academic qualifications	<i>Barrier</i> Low academic qualification limited the opportunities for permanent and well-paying jobs Lack skills/ knowledge for the current workplace Lack of access to information on jobs	I lack academic qualification and experience. These are two main barriers (Interviewee S2)  The problem is I don't know where to start and where to look for jobs. With my skillset and low academic qualifications – what are my options? (Interviewee S17)
Economic capital	Financial constraints	<i>Barrier</i> Low income meant that they were unable to afford childcare Inability to upskill their academic qualifications	Having childcare options or having someone to care for my children would really help. It means that I can work more hours and I don't have to worry. It has to be affordable, of course. (Interviewee S12) Academic qualifications matter nowadays. But when you don't have a choice, you just do whatever is available. (Interviewee 30)

## Gender-role Expectations as a Barrier to Work Re-entry

The data showed that traditional gender roles and expectations have constrained the role of single mothers to being caregivers. In addition, single mothers' commitments to care for others (i.e. children, elderly parents, and family members) have prevented them from getting or progressing in work:

*Even if I do have a job opportunity, who will take care of my son? It has to be me (Interviewee S11)*

*Taking care of my mother is a full-time job. So I have to put my plans on hold (Interviewee S5).*

These excerpts reflect the well-established fact that caring commitments impact women more heavily, especially regarding women's career decisions. Understandably, all the participants reported that having affordable childcare opportunities would allow them to return to work:

*Having childcare facilities or having someone to care for my children would really help. It means that I can work more hours and I don't have to worry about their safety. It has to be affordable, of course. (Interview S12)*

*I need assistance with childcare. I need the ones that are not expensive but are reliable (Interviewee S25).*

This finding revealed that single mothers, especially with pre-school aged children and below, were less flexible in seeking employment due to their concerns about childcare arrangements. Therefore, a single mother facing choices between work and family must consider the cost, accessibility, and types of childcare available. While many childcare advocates state the primary function of childcare should not be to enable parents to go to work, these findings revealed that childcare enables single mothers for reemployment:

*If I am able to find childcare, I will definitely take the job. But if I cannot find an alternative, I will have to take care of the children myself. So I will wait until they are older (Interviewee S28).*

*Last year I could not [work]. With both children in school now, I can work. (Interviewee S29).*

The findings established single mothers' primary role to be a carer. This appears to shape their decisions about work re-entry, in that more women enter part-time work or delay their decisions to enter the labour market in order to balance such commitments. Moreover, there is a strong economic need for these mothers to be financially independent, and that was expressed by the overwhelming consensus ( $n = 26$ ) of wanting to return to work.

### **Lack of Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital refers to a person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills). Education increases one's cultural capital and helps achieve a higher status in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Only two of the interviewees had a degree or diploma. Most had low academic qualification, thus low cultural capital. This was attributed to their early entry into motherhood and opted to raise the children themselves, often eliminating education opportunities beyond high school (SPM school leavers). As the majority of the mothers married between 19 to 25 years and soon became mothers, this became a significant barrier to finding work.

Consequently, finding employment opportunities that matched their educational qualifications in the labour market was reported to be challenging and demotivating. The available jobs often only paid a minimum wage and were contractual or part-time. For this reason, despite their desire for employment, some single mothers perceived that the likelihood of getting jobs to be very low:

*Unfortunately, my qualification is low, also at my age... So I know I will get a low paying job. (Interviewee S27)*

Low education levels also appear to negatively affect their desire to seek employment because they doubted their earnings would compensate for their time directed away from their family responsibilities. Additionally, for single mothers in their 40s, the findings revealed that postponing work re-entry may have negative consequences in that the single mothers lack the skills and experience and awareness of what is needed in the workplace.

*It has been quite some time since I was in the workforce. I don't know what jobs are out there right now. Maybe there are opportunities out there, but I'm not aware of it. (Interviewee S11)*

Our study confirmed that lower education levels had impeded the work options for single mothers in urban Sarawak and their opportunity to achieve upward mobility.

### **Deficiency of Economic Capital**

These single mothers represent a demographic of economically disadvantaged women. Their low incomes remain a barrier to work re-entry as childcare and upskill training are beyond their economic means. The effect of family income or lack of it becomes more substantial for single mothers with young children. As a result, these financial constraints also profoundly affected opportunities to balance paid work and family. As mentioned previously, these single mothers are in the B40 category, an already economically disadvantaged demographic. Their challenge is further exacerbated by the high living costs in urban Sarawak.

Furthermore, they carry the burden of sole household provider, including childcare and caring for others. That the interviewees expressed the need to have affordable and accessible childcare while they are at work, or as a pre-requisite for their work re-entry, highlights how childcare is a heavy financial burden to single mothers. This finding reflects the well-established fact that caring commitments impact more heavily on women and their career decisions. Understandably, all the single mothers ( $n = 26$ ) appeared to believe that affordable childcare options would allow them to work:

*Having childcare options /someone to care for my special needs son while I work would allow me to find a job. (Interviewee S11)*

*Having childcare options or having someone to care for my children would really help. It means that I can work more hours and I don't have to worry. It has to be affordable, of course. (Interviewee S12)*

*Yes, having childcare options would definitely help me in finding jobs. Someone who understands what it is like to have children, also a mother. (Interviewee S19)*

Single mothers struggle to access affordable childcare in a convenient location and of sufficient quality that they are assured the child is cared for. Hence, childcare measures, such as childcare subsidy policies, leave policies, and working time policies would encourage single mothers to re-enter the workforce. Single mothers also face inequity in education opportunities. Unable to pay tuition fees, their work options are limited, which perpetuates the poverty cycle. Being the family provider and carer has limited the work choices of single mothers. They need to find a good match between work and family. This financial issue is acute for single mothers. Already known as low-income earners, single mothers are often receiving financial assistance, social or welfare assistance. Lack of access to economic resources restricts the possibilities to find solutions that fit their ideal of integrating paid work and family.

## **DISCUSSION**

The following section discusses capital, economic, and social barriers to work re-entry for single mothers in urban Sarawak and how these barriers influence their decision-making when seeking employment.

### **How Low Academic Qualifications, Primary Role as Caregiver and Financial Constraints Further Perpetuate the Cycle of Poverty: Cultural Capital**

This study expands our understanding of social/cultural/economic capitals and how they are perceived as enablers or barriers to work re-entry decisions for single mothers in Sarawak. The study has uncovered the complexity of such decisions for single mothers, with multiple interrelated factors becoming barriers to financial independence. For example, childcare is a key issue as employment decisions for single mothers are directly linked to the dual responsibilities of raising children and work. Many of the single mothers expressed how having younger children presents the most significant barrier for full-time employment. Furthermore, single mothers also face financial constraints. They have difficulty in accessing affordable

and convenient childcare. These disadvantages limit the ability of single mothers to compete for employment opportunities.

The narratives describe the extent to how cultural capitals are not always accessible to single mothers. This is evidenced by the lack of social capital reported in the study, which in other literature has been described as playing a mitigating role for work-family conflict (Ciabattari, 2007; Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). Consequently, changes for upward mobility are truncated (Buchmann et al., 2020).

The findings have also revealed that employment and opportunities differ greatly by education, thus exacerbating the challenge for single mothers to enter the workforce (Damaske et al., 2017), especially in urban areas. Because single mothers often lack the skills and education required for high wage positions, childcare costs consume their wages. Aw and Sabri (2020) reported that 75% of single mothers in Malaysia live below the poverty line. That the single mothers in the study live in high-cost urban areas of Sarawak, making them more vulnerable than ever.

Like other studies (Misra, Moller, Strader, & Wemlinger, 2012), we have found that the poverty of single mothers is fundamentally rooted in a lack of time. The problem is complex since single parents must use their time for two competing purposes: to earn an income sufficient to support their families and care for their children and themselves. This lack of time is often exacerbated by the limited earning capacity of women with low education levels. It is well recognised that employment is a “key mechanism through which poverty is averted or limited” (Misra et al., 2012, p. 113), and Herbst-Debby (2018) reported that “active integration in the job market was considered the most beneficial and desirable form of assistance from the state” (p. 151) in welfare states as it reduces dependence on benefits. Though in developing nations, such welfare-to-work initiatives are novel, it may address the challenges reported on childcare costs.

This study adds to the literature by exploring how lack of access to certain social and human capital influences single mothers’ work re-entry decisions. Of course, cultural, social, and economic capitals do not function in isolation, and the current findings reinforce the complexity of integrating single mothers of low income and education levels into the labour market. Our recommendation thus echoes that of Yulita et al. (2020) on the



instrumental role of the state government as it possesses the authority to set policies, financial resources and provide programs that facilitate the single mothers' work re-entry. Employment-enabling government policies are critical. To illustrate, studies have shown that both parental leave policies and childcare may influence a mothers' ability to combine work and care without falling into poverty. Such policies target the barriers single mothers face in balancing care and employment (Arpino & Luppi, 2020; Misra et al., 2012). Having childcare measures such as childcare subsidies or working time policies would encourage single mothers into work re-entry (Hwang & Jung, 2020; Noakes, 2020). Childcare allows single mothers to balance family and work, have more continuity in their career, and improve their socio-economic position.

The study highlights the value of work for single mothers, but their economic disadvantage affects their ability to return to employment. The low earning capacity, low job opportunity, and unaffordable child result in low economic well-being. Work was thus viewed as key to escaping poverty; however, many found it unsustainable because of irregular or part-time hours and paying a significant portion of their wages for childcare. Based on our analyses, we argue that poverty among mothers and their children can be substantially limited through the right mix of social policy and education and labour market policies that help engage single mothers in well-paying jobs (Misra et al., 2012, p. 124). Such initiatives as the above would help alleviate the burden of a single-parent family and enhance their well-being (Aw & Sabri, 2020). The study also confirms the importance of government policy interventions that compensate for the single mothers' lack of social/cultural capitals (Yasuike, 2019). Support needs to go beyond welfare, reeducation, and upskilling. As well as financial resources, critical aspects of cultural capital such as academic knowledge and information about the current workforce all had a bearing on the extent to which single mothers felt empowered in obtaining employment opportunities.

## **Theoretical Implications**

Findings from the study offer two noteworthy implications for theoretical advancement on research related to single mothers. First, the study highlights the challenges facing single mothers in an urban area and developing country, which differ from that of a rural area and developed country. In particular, the study finds that single mothers in urban areas

considered financial constraints, low academic qualifications and their role as primary caregiver as barriers to work re-entry. Second, these findings extend the caregiving priorities of single mothers by demonstrating a clear order of importance, with family emerging as the top priority and work is given the lower priority.

The study also offers new insights into the profiling of single mothers in urban areas in a developing country and their needs to return to work. The demographic of single mothers in Sarawak is not homogenous, as evidenced by the age of children and those who are able to access welfare and receive financial support. This thus means that needs and support will vary greatly. More specifically, the current findings support that of many others (Damaske et al., 2017; Fonseka & Malhotra, 2020) in that in urban areas, poverty does exist and that not everyone can receive tertiary education. Moreover, single mothers in urban areas are highly focused on accessible childcare, given that they unanimously would like to be financially independent through employment. These findings provide new ground on single mothers caught in the urbanisation of rural areas from the perspective of a developing country.

Our paper extends the research call for a better understanding of the roles that family plays in work re-entry decisions for single mothers located in urban Sarawak. The roles operate as both enablers and barriers. In the findings, family duties played a significant role in promoting work re-entry decisions. However, family duties need to be balanced to enable and not hinder work re-entry decisions. Our paper also answers the need to understand the dynamics of how factors are interrelated when it comes to re-entry decisions. Not only did single mothers make use of their family social/cultural capitals in different ways, but also the available social/cultural capitals vary depending on the family's background, position in society, academic qualifications, and the accessibility of a support network. As mentioned previously, there is a lack of research on single mothers from developing countries, particularly in the labour force. A comparison of the role of various social/cultural capitals in different contexts can further our understanding of the relevance and significance of the family and the motivation for returning to work for single mothers.

## **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Notwithstanding the contributions drawn from the present study, several important limitations need to be considered. These limitations, in turn, pave the way forward for future research on single mothers and work re-entry. First, the generalizability of the findings of the study is subject to certain limitations; for instance, it is limited by the sample size of 26 single mothers in urban Sarawak, Malaysia. Thus, though the findings might resonate, to a certain extent, for single mothers in regional developing countries, such as urban states in Indonesia, future research is needed to account for the various barriers of work re-entry among single mothers in urban areas in other developing countries, such as the African, American, and European continents. Second, the design of the study is limited to exploratory insights, and thus, its solutions cannot be taken as conclusive or final. Instead, future research is strongly encouraged to adopt a causal research design to test the cause and effect of proposed solutions in order to gain a more accurate projection on its effectiveness in mitigating the barriers and engineering work re-entry transitions among single mothers, especially those in urban areas in developing countries, as single mothers are not homogeneous. In short, the insights into the barriers to work re-entry among single mothers herein are seminal in the sense that they focus on an important but underexplored area in the form of urban areas in developing countries. It is hoped that the insights will stimulate greater research interest in this area, and more importantly, improve the well-being of single mothers in the area.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our study confirms the importance of social/cultural capitals in the single mothers' decision to re-enter the workforce. The single mothers in the study have expressed the desire to be financially independent, and this can only be achieved through full-time employment due to the reported high standard of living in urban Sarawak. Nonetheless, barriers such as women's primary caregiver roles, low levels of education, and financial constraints further exacerbated inequalities of work re-entry (i.e. inability to further their education and inability to afford childcare). Subsequently, this further perpetuated the cycle of poverty for an already economically disadvantaged group. The findings highlight the social, cultural, and economic implications

of obstacles facing single mothers considering work re-entry. Findings from the study provide noteworthy recommendations that can be adopted by policymakers and support groups to empower and support single mothers' re-entry into the labour market, especially those in urban areas in developing countries. Policymakers who want to support single mothers can focus on systematic ways to map relevant family resources from their networks.

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