

Religious Coping Strategies Among Divorced Single Mothers in Garut: Managing Stigma and Patriarchal Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how divorced single mothers in Garut, West Java, navigate social, cultural, and economic pressures in a society deeply rooted in patriarchal norms. It explores how religious coping strategies assist them in managing emotions, combating social stigma, and addressing gender injustice. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a multiperspective framework to explore the experiences of four informants selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and thematically analyzed to identify key patterns in religious coping strategies. The study is grounded in Kenneth Pargament's religious coping theory and Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory, which provide a robust theoretical foundation. The findings reveal that religious coping strategies help single mothers cope with social and economic pressures through three main approaches. First, self-directing strategies strengthen independence and problem-solving skills. Second, deferring strategies provide emotional peace by entrusting outcomes to God. Third, collaborative coping enhances spiritual connections through prayer and dhikr. Furthermore, the reinterpretation of religious teachings plays a crucial role in challenging patriarchal norms, promoting dignity, resilience, and self-identity. These strategies not only support psychological well-being but also function as tools for empowerment and gender justice. However, this study is limited by its small sample size and localized scope, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

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Introduction

Divorce brings significant consequences for women emotionally, socially, and economically. Emotionally, women often face psychological pressures due to the separation, including the loss of a partner, family conflicts, and impacts on children. Socially, divorced women frequently encounter stigma and negative societal perceptions that view divorce as a failure of women to maintain their households (Suryana et al., 2023). Economically, many women experience a decline in their quality of life due to the loss of financial support from their partners, while still bearing the responsibility of supporting their families (Dirgahayu et al., 2023). This situation becomes even more complicated for women who also serve as heads of households, requiring them to take on dual roles in meeting the family's needs while maintaining the emotional well-being of their children. Primayuni (2019) explains in her research that women as heads of households are often required to adapt to dual responsibilities, both economic and emotional, for their children.

Previous studies have shown that female heads of households face complex challenges, both personally and financially, such as a lack of confidence in planning their family's future after separation, inadequate financial management skills, and difficulties in balancing work and childcare (Fauzi & Arifin, 2024; Primayuni, 2019; Yuniar, 2023). Financial difficulties, including challenges in improving the family's economic situation and limited access to decent employment, are major obstacles (Hasanuddin, 2021). These challenges are exacerbated by social stigma and negative stereotypes about female heads of households, adding psychological pressure and hindering them from building supportive social networks (Dewi, 2024).

Social stigma and negative stereotypes about female heads of households or single mothers often pose significant barriers in their lives. Society tends to view incomplete families as flawed, frequently blaming women who lead households for their situations (Rachman et al., 2023). They are perceived as unable to maintain household harmony or even suspected of negatively impacting social morality. This perception not only creates emotional pressure but also hinders their ability to build supportive social relationships. Additionally, such discrimination often affects their career opportunities, where they are deemed less competent or incapable of balancing work and family responsibilities (Saputri et al., 2023). These conditions exacerbate the marginalization of female heads of households, making them more vulnerable to economic and social difficulties (Rachman et al., 2023). To address these issues, collective efforts from society are needed to eliminate negative prejudices and support female heads of households through education, access to decent jobs, and inclusive social networks.

Efforts to address these challenges include providing social support from both the community and government and strengthening the mental health of female heads of

households. Iganingrat and Eva (2021) explain that such social support can create an inclusive and supportive environment. Meanwhile, mental health reinforcement can be achieved through counseling services, psychological therapy, and stress management training to help them manage emotional pressure and dual responsibilities (Noeralamsyah & Maulidina, 2023). This approach is expected to improve their economic, social, and emotional well-being.

This study focuses on strengthening mental health strategies employed by female heads of households in dealing with such challenges, commonly referred to as coping strategies. Coping strategies involve various emotional and practical efforts to address psychological pressures, manage dual responsibilities, and build resilience in fulfilling their roles as heads of households (Wianti & Mustika, 2024). Previous studies have shown that coping strategies play an effective role in helping female heads of households overcome the psychological issues they face. According to Yulfa et al. (2022) emotion-based coping strategies, such as self-acceptance and stress management, can enhance psychological stability in female heads of households.

Further research suggests that, in addition to emotion-based strategies, religious coping approaches also significantly support the mental health of female heads of households. In stressful situations, religious coping strategies can serve as an effective alternative, especially when individuals feel unable to face reality independently and choose to rely on spiritual strength as a source of peace and hope. This study builds on research by (Suwardani and Yasa (2019), which explored religious coping strategies among single mothers in Indonesia, focusing on those with civil servant backgrounds in Bali, the majority of whom are Hindu.

This research differs from prior studies by focusing on religious coping strategies used by divorced single mothers. Garut was selected due to its high divorce rate, with a 5% increase in cases from 2021, totaling 5,700 cases received and processed in the Religious Court (Dedi, 2024). Unlike Suwardani and Yasa (2019) who studied Hindu women, this research examines low-income single mothers of Islamic background. This religious context provides an additional dimension to understanding how Islamic spiritual values and teachings can contribute to their coping strategies in addressing psychological pressures, economic challenges, and gender inequality. It is hoped that this perspective enriches the understanding of the effectiveness of religious coping strategies across various sociological and anthropological contexts.

The theoretical framework for this study is theory of religious coping strategies, which explores the correlation between individual, social, and contextual factors in resolving problems through religion (Pargament & Park, 2019). It examines how individuals seek religious guidance from leaders such as priests or imams, turn to prayer and scripture, and place faith in the afterlife. The theory invites researchers to explore

how individuals seek purpose and support for intimacy and emotional expression through religion, assessing both positive and negative aspects such as divine will and spiritual punishment or threats.

Pargament's theory categorizes coping control into three approaches: self-directing, which emphasizes self-reliance without depending on God; deferring, a passive approach affirming God's role in resolving problems; and collaborative coping, which actively involves God alongside oneself in addressing issues (Wilt et al., 2024). These approaches are not aimed at identifying the correct or incorrect ways to address problems through religion but rather understanding how a deep conception of God's power and human initiative can be integrated. This approach seeks to examine religion's role in emotional regulation, combating gender oppression, constructing life events, and implementing tangible steps to manage stress. Additionally, this study is grounded in Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory, which explores gender oppression experienced by single mothers in Garut, West Java, and their resistance to patriarchal structures (Frazer, 2020).

Based on this description, the urgency of this research lies in understanding how religious coping strategies can serve as mechanisms for single mothers to confront psychological pressures, economic challenges, and social stigma, particularly in regions with high divorce rates like Garut. This study aims to explore the role of religion in supporting emotional management, self-empowerment, and efforts to combat gender inequality faced by female heads of households. Using Kenneth Pargament's coping theory and Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory, this research aspires to provide significant scientific contributions by developing new perspectives on the relationship between religious coping strategies, mental health, and women's empowerment within a discriminatory social structure.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a multiperspective approach encompassing sociology, phenomenology, and psychology to examine the management of religious coping strategies in response to the stigma experienced by divorced single mothers in Garut, West Java. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on specific criteria: single mothers who have divorced from their partners, have an income below the minimum wage in Garut, and live with their children in a single household. After initial selection based on these criteria, the number of informants was determined through snowball sampling. This technique was chosen as it allows the researcher to identify additional informants based on recommendations from previous informants who were considered to meet the research criteria (Parker et al., 2019). This approach ensures that the data collected is relevant and comprehensive, with a final count of four informants who align with the research objectives.

In-depth interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and telephone. To minimize bias, the researcher designed the interviews with several steps in mind. First, the interview guide was systematically developed, taking into account the neutrality of the questions to avoid influencing the informants' responses. Second, the interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed-upon time, generally in the morning when the participants were fresh and more capable of sharing their experiences in detail. Third, the researcher ensured that the interview environment supported the participants' comfort, such as providing breaks if necessary. Additionally, each interview was recorded with the informants' permission to maintain data accuracy and facilitate more in-depth analysis.

The selection of only four informants in this study is based on the fact that, in qualitative research, the primary focus is on the depth of the data obtained, not the quantity of participants. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, four informants were chosen based on their relevance to the research criteria and their ability to provide profound insights into the experiences of divorced single mothers. This number is considered sufficient because the thematic data analysis applied aims to uncover significant patterns and themes from individual experiences, not to make statistical generalizations. This approach allows for a comprehensive and focused exploration of the phenomenon under study.

The resulting narrative is presented from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the participants' views on the phenomenon based on their experiences and backgrounds. The collected data was analyzed using thematic data analysis, which aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) that emerge from the data (Rozali, 2022). The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interviews, followed by a thorough reading and understanding to identify initial patterns. The data was then coded according to categories relevant to the study, such as socio-cultural pressures, religious coping strategies, and the experiences of single mothers in facing challenges. After coding, the data was grouped into main themes that represent key issues emerging from the data. This thematic analysis allows the researcher to delve into the informants' narratives, linking them to Pargament's religious coping framework and Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist theory. Through this approach, thematic data analysis provides a holistic understanding of how religious coping strategies are used by single mothers in Garut to face socio-cultural pressures and structural challenges.

Result and Discussion

1. Social and Cultural Pressures Faced by Single Mothers

Single mothers face significant social and cultural pressures that impact their psychological, social, and economic well-being (Wulandari, 2024). One of their primary challenges is the social stigma associated with divorce, which often labels single mothers as "failures" in maintaining their families. This perception reflects the deeply rooted internalization of patriarchal culture in Indonesian society, including in Garut, West Java, exacerbating the marginalization of single mothers. These findings align with Mary

Wollstonecraft's critique of patriarchal systems, which not only confine women to traditional roles but also foster the belief that women, particularly single mothers, are incapable of meeting rigid societal expectations (Godayol, 2023).

Social stigma against single mothers in Garut frequently manifests in forms of both direct and indirect discrimination. This discrimination is heavily influenced by societal views that consider single mothers as failing to conform to traditional gender roles. Common expressions of such discrimination include negative stereotypes, such as assumptions that single mothers are less capable of managing households, whether in terms of finances or their children's education. These views not only reflect unfair expectations but also illustrate how rigid gender norms restrict women's potential to thrive beyond pre-determined societal roles (Basiroen et al., 2024).

Such negative labels are further reinforced by local cultural dynamics that prioritize men as family heads and primary breadwinners, rendering female-headed households socially unconventional (Sofyan et al., 2021). In this context, single mothers are often systematically marginalized, either through direct actions or condescending attitudes. These behaviors perpetuate the ideology that women's value lies solely in their ability to fulfill traditional familial roles—a perspective Wollstonecraft critiqued as a major barrier to women's equality and recognition of their dignity (Uzomah & Uzomah, 2024).

The impacts of this stigma extend beyond psychological effects, such as diminished self-esteem and increased risk of mental health issues, to social and economic domains. Psychologically, single mothers in Garut frequently feel ostracized, isolated from the social support networks essential for their well-being. As the negative stigma intensifies, they often experience profound psychological burdens, such as acute shame from failing to meet traditional familial norms (Cholilah & Nurmaidah, 2022). This shame triggers feelings of unworthiness and anxiety, further deteriorating their mental health. Social pressure to conform to societal expectations often discourages them from seeking help or discussing their challenges, exacerbating their sense of social isolation.

Economically, workplace discrimination is a major barrier faced by single mothers. Despite having adequate qualifications and education, they often struggle to secure fair employment compared to men or other women who are not single mothers (Shindy et al., 2022). This challenge arises partly because of their dual responsibilities as both caregivers and breadwinners, which are perceived as limitations in their ability to maintain commitment and productivity at work.

Overall, the pressures faced by divorced single mothers in Garut are complex, affecting nearly every aspect of their lives, including psychological, social, and economic dimensions. Social stigma that positions them as "failures" in maintaining families not only inflicts emotional wounds but also fosters deep shame and helplessness. These psychological burdens are further compounded by structural obstacles, such as

workplace discrimination and inadequate access to social support. In this context, Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of patriarchy remains highly relevant: a system that values women solely for their domestic roles not only perpetuates marginalization but also actively obstructs their potential to rise and contribute independently. Without fundamental cultural and policy reforms, women particularly single mothers will remain trapped in a cycle of systemic injustice.

2. Religious Coping Strategies for Single Mothers

Single mothers in Garut face multifaceted social, cultural, and economic pressures that significantly impact their psychological and social well-being. Among the main challenges is the social stigma associated with divorce, which often positions single mothers as having failed to sustain their families. This study views religious coping strategies as a critical mechanism for single mothers to navigate these pressures. Previous research indicates that such strategies involve leveraging religious beliefs and practices to manage life's challenges, build resilience, and strengthen psychological and spiritual well-being (Bryant et al., 2024; Karaba, 2024; Pertek, 2024). This study employs Pargament's theoretical framework, which outlines three primary approaches to religious coping: self-directing, deferring, and collaborative coping (Wilt et al., 2024). These approaches help single mothers develop resilience, provide meaning, and enhance their spiritual well-being amidst life's challenges.

2.1. Self-Directing Approach

The self-directing approach in religious coping is evident among single mothers in Garut who actively strive to overcome life's challenges by relying on their own abilities and efforts while maintaining their faith in God. Despite economic hardships and other difficulties stemming from divorce, many single mothers work tirelessly to provide for their families. They do not solely depend on worldly efforts but also hold firm to their belief that God will provide assistance. One manifestation of this effort is their decision to prioritize religious education for their children, even when time and resources are limited. These mothers believe that by combining their best efforts with prayer and worship, they can draw strength from God to navigate the difficulties they face.

2.2. Deferring Approach

The deferring approach is often employed by single mothers when they feel that the challenges they face such as severe economic burdens or persistent social stigma are beyond their control. In these situations, single mothers tend to surrender their problems entirely to God, trusting that every occurrence is part of a greater divine plan that will eventually provide solutions. This attitude of surrender offers inner peace, as they believe God is always present to guide and support them through life's difficulties.

2.3. Collaborative Coping Approach

Collaborative coping is also widely observed among single mothers, who strengthen their spiritual relationship with God through various religious practices, such as prayer and dzikir (remembrance of God). For many single mothers, regular worship and dzikir serve as ways to calm their hearts and minds while gaining emotional strength to face life's challenges. This approach fosters a sense of spiritual and emotional support from God, providing reassurance that life's problems can be overcome. These practices not only bring peace but also reinforce their determination to persevere for their children's future, with the conviction that God will provide sustenance and solutions, even in difficult circumstances.

Religious practices supporting these coping strategies among single mothers in Garut include routine activities such as prayer, tahajud (night prayers), Quranic recitation, and consultations with religious leaders. These practices serve not only as acts of worship but also as means to achieve inner peace and strengthen their spiritual connection with God. Such activities enable them to find solace despite the challenges they face (Dolcos et al., 2021). Single mothers who actively engage in religious practices report significantly greater inner peace compared to those who do not. Research by Nugrahaningrum and Rachmah, (2023), shows that regular Quranic recitation helps individuals improve their positive perceptions of themselves and their lives, while reducing feelings of isolation caused by social stigma. These practices thus provide not only a space for personal reflection but also the mental strength needed to cope with stressful situations.

As part of a broader coping strategy, these religious practices align with Pargament's theory of religious coping, which emphasizes that religious coping not only mitigates stress but also provides meaning, hope, and a sense of control amidst life's challenges. Single mothers in Garut, through the self-directing approach, address problems using their own efforts and skills while maintaining their faith in God. The deferring approach allows them to surrender their affairs to God, offering peace of mind and acceptance of destiny. Additionally, the collaborative coping approach, characterized by an active partnership with God through prayer and dzikir, strengthens their emotional and spiritual support systems. By integrating these approaches, their religious practices not only reinforce their faith but also provide significant mental support, enabling them to view each challenge as an opportunity for growth and improved quality of life.

3. The Role of Religion in Managing Stigma and Pressure

Religion plays a significant role in helping single mothers in Garut manage the stigma and pressures they face. In circumstances where social pressures, cultural stigma, and economic challenges often become heavy burdens, religion serves as a solace and a profound source of strength. Single mothers frequently confront negative societal perceptions due to divorce, which can undermine their self-confidence and exacerbate social isolation. However, religion provides a framework for reinterpreting their

circumstances as part of life's trials, designed to strengthen faith and character (Nursanti et al., 2021). In this context, religious practices transcend rituals, becoming emotional healing mechanisms that help them rediscover their identity, hope, and purpose in life (Nugroho, 2023). By drawing closer to God, these women feel better equipped to manage their emotions, calm their minds, and approach life's challenges with greater optimism. This makes religion not merely a coping tool but a foundational element that provides psychological stability amidst uncertainty.

Research conducted by Anjani (2019) found a positive correlation between religious practices, such as prayer and regular worship, and reduced stress levels among individuals facing life pressures. In Garut, single mothers actively engaged in religious activities, such as nightly prayers (tahajud) and Quranic recitation, reported increased inner peace and decreased anxiety. They felt more at ease dealing with problems, grounded in the belief that everything occurring in their lives is part of God's plan. This sense of calm is further supported by the conviction that religion offers answers to existential questions such as "Why did this happen to me?" or "What is my purpose in life after divorce?" These religiously grounded answers provide new meaning to their lives, enabling them to face challenges with a more positive outlook (Petts, 2023).

Religion also acts as a source of life meaning for single mothers in Garut. A study by Jayanti et al. (2019) showed that religion helps individuals find meaning in difficult circumstances, allowing them to view such events as opportunities for growth and drawing closer to God. Single mothers interviewed in this study revealed that through religion, they learned to accept their circumstances as trials to be endured with patience. For example, the social stigma of divorce was not seen as an end but as part of a process toward building a better life. By understanding the Islamic concepts of fate (qadar) and trials (bala'), they developed better emotional control, which helped maintain their mental health amidst societal pressures.

Islamic values also provide strong motivation for single mothers to continue striving for their children's future. Research by Amri (2020) highlighted that Islamic teachings about parental responsibilities inspire single mothers to persevere in meeting their families' needs, even when they face economic and time constraints. This motivation is derived not only from the belief that God will provide sustenance but also from the spiritual support gained through religious practices (Zhang, 2023). In Garut, single mothers reported feeling motivated to work harder after gaining emotional strength through regular worship. Thus, religion functions not only as a spiritual refuge but also as a tool for overcoming stigma, constructing life meaning, and offering essential mental support for single mothers in navigating life's pressures.

4. Strengthening Religious Coping Strategies through Patriarchal System Deconstruction

The patriarchal system dominating various social structures has stigmatized women, particularly single mothers, by placing them in subordinate positions (Folbre, 2021). This system often exploits cultural norms and gender-biased interpretations of religious teachings to maintain power imbalances between men and women. However, single mothers can deconstruct patriarchy through targeted religious coping strategies, reaffirming the religious values that inherently promote justice and equality. This process involves reinterpreting religious texts and traditions that are frequently used to legitimize gender injustice. In this context, single mothers become active agents, reconstructing the meanings of religious texts to affirm their dignity and rights. This approach necessitates a critical understanding of spiritual values that uphold human equality (Malowa, 2024).

The deconstruction of patriarchy in a religious context requires a profound understanding of Qur'anic texts. Surah An-Nisa (4:1) emphasizes that men and women are created from the same essence, affirming their ontological equality. However, gender-biased interpretations often neglect this message of equality and instead reinforce patriarchal social structures. Single mothers can take the initiative to independently reinterpret religious texts as part of their coping strategies. This effort not only strengthens their spirituality but also constitutes an essential step in deconstructing harmful patriarchal narratives (Hakim, 2020). Such reinterpretation requires courage to question conservative and gender-biased religious authorities.

Religious coping approaches, as described in Pargament's theory, enable single mothers to comprehend religious teachings independently, free from biased interpretations. This strategy allows them to draw strength from within through a more authentic understanding of religious teachings. In deferring coping, they surrender to God with the understanding that God is a liberating source of strength, not an instrument to legitimize oppression. Verses like Surah Al-Baqarah (2:286), which states that God does not burden a soul beyond its capacity, serve as spiritual reinforcement. This approach helps them to detach from the social pressures rooted in patriarchy.

Collaborative coping involves engaging God as a partner in addressing life's challenges, with single mothers relying on faith while actively taking responsibility for their lives. This strategy often manifests through participation in progressive religious communities. Amri (2020) found that single mothers active in religious study groups receive emotional, spiritual, and social support that helps them combat stigma. Such communities also provide a space to discuss interpretations of religion that promote gender equality (Kaiser & Lennartson, 2022). In this way, single mothers not only strengthen their positions but also foster broader social change.

Spiritual practices such as prayer, dzikir (remembrance of God), and contemplation are also integral to religious coping strategies. These practices help single mothers

reconstruct the meaning of their lives and strengthen their relationship with God as a source of inner peace. Zhang (2023) study highlights that religion can serve as a positive tool for coping with social pressures. For single mothers, these practices offer a spiritual foundation to face life's challenges without succumbing to patriarchal norms that limit their potential. At the same time, these practices function as a form of resistance against the social stigma they have long endured.

With targeted religious coping strategies, single mothers not only free themselves from social stigma but also build new, stronger identities. They become agents of change, advocating for women's rights in patriarchally dominated societies. This process demonstrates that religion, when understood critically and deeply, can serve as a powerful tool to combat gender injustice. The deconstruction of patriarchy through this approach creates opportunities for single mothers to establish a more equitable and inclusive social order while affirming their dignity as empowered and equal individuals.

Conclusion

This study reveals that religious coping strategies assist single mothers in addressing social and economic pressures within patriarchal societies through three main approaches: self-directing, which strengthens independence and problem-solving skills; deferring, which provides emotional peace by entrusting outcomes to God; and collaborative coping, which enhances spiritual connections through prayer and dzikir. In patriarchal societies, the reinterpretation of religious teachings serves as a critical tool for single mothers to challenge discriminatory norms, reinforce their dignity, resilience, and self-identity. These strategies not only support psychological well-being but also function as mechanisms for empowerment and resistance against gender injustice. It is recommended to develop gender-equitable religious education programs to encourage a critical understanding of religious values, enabling single mothers to navigate social challenges more effectively. Additionally, the establishment of progressive religious communities is crucial to providing emotional, spiritual, and social support while promoting inclusive interpretations of religious teachings. This study is limited by its narrow geographical scope and small sample size, necessitating further research with broader coverage and larger samples to capture more diverse perspectives.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Annisa Qurrotul Ayuni was responsible for designing the research and data collection. Riski Eka Purnairawan conducted the data analysis and assisted in manuscript writing.

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